

Mexican California

1821–1848



The California that evolved as a province of Mexico was a far cry from the colonial appendage it had been under Spain. The revolutionary fervor sweeping through the Spanish colonies broke out in New Spain in 1810. Eleven years later, on September 28, 1821, a revolutionary junta presided over by an ex-royalist, Agustín Iturbide, declared Mexican independence. Iturbide quickly proclaimed himself emperor of Mexico but just as quickly fell from power the following year. In 1824 liberal reformers established a new constitution creating the Federal Republic of Mexico, a democratic form of government inaugurated in the United States just 35 years earlier and a dramatic change from the autocratic Spanish colonial system. However, few Mexicans could read or write, or had experience with representative government, leading to an era of constant political conflict as liberal and conservative factions fought for control of the federal government. Under the new Constitution, California, like Mexico's other frontier provinces of Texas and New Mexico, became a territory theoretically governed directly by the Mexican Congress. But the Congress failed to establish any clear policies for administration or financial support of the territories, leaving them in a state of confusion and destitution.

On the other hand, the reformers of 1824 broke sharply with some of the most restrictive policies of Spain, laying the groundwork for dramatic changes over the next two decades. Native Americans were to be integrated into Mexican society with equal political and social status; the poorly enforced prohibition of trade with foreigners was ended; and foreigners who embraced Catholicism were allowed to become citizens and to own land. The new political order in Mexico also seemed to promise Californios access to political offices previously denied them, producing strong personal and sectional rivalries

and a growing desire for home rule. California under Mexico thus began as a neglected and isolated province where the descendants of soldiers and early *pobladores* (settlers) struggled to build a new society of their own.

Establishment of Mexican Government in California

In 1822 Iturbide's short-lived government established a new structure of local government for California, appointing a new governor and providing for the election of a *diputación*, or provincial assembly, to advise the governor; an *ayuntamiento*, or town council, for each of the two pueblos, San José and Los Angeles; and a provincial representative to the new Mexican Congress.

Luis Antonio Argüello was the first *hijo del país* (native son) appointed to the new position of governor of California, and he enjoyed wide popular support. Argüello's chief concern as governor was reviving the economy. The revolution had all but eliminated coastal shipping between California and Mexico, causing the last Spanish governor, Pablo Vicente de Solá, to relax many of the colonial restrictions on trading with foreigners. In 1822, just before leaving office, Solá allowed William E. P. Hartnell and Hugh McCullough, who represented the British firm of John Begg & Co., to sign three-year contracts with almost all the missions for their production of hides and tallow. Argüello granted similar privileges to William Gale, who was acting on behalf of the Boston firm of Bryant & Sturgis, which eventually dominated the trade. The prospect of increased revenue from trade in hides and tallow may also have encouraged Argüello to issue several large land grants between 1823 and 1824.

Argüello's appointment ended in 1825, when the first governor appointed under the Republic arrived at San Diego. José María Echeandía, a gaunt, hypochondriacal lieutenant colonel in the Army Corps of Engineers, has probably been underestimated as governor, partly because he immediately contributed to the developing rivalry between north and south. Announcing that the foggy climate of the capital, Monterey, was bad for his health, he made San Diego his chief place of residence and the unofficial capital, a move that pleased southerners and offended northerners. But Echeandía deserves credit for dealing, as best he could under difficult circumstances, with several major problems: rebellious soldiers and Natives, the ominous appearance of American fur trappers from the east, and the Mexican government's instructions to begin the secularization of the missions.

Echeandía inherited a demoralized military establishment. Many of the soldiers sent to California were undisciplined ex-convicts, misfits, and vagabonds, the source of constant conflict with missionaries and townspeople, and the government was far in arrears in their pay. Consequently, a serious mutiny erupted at Monterey in 1829, led by a former soldier-convict, Joaquín Solís. Solís and a force of unpaid soldiers marched south against the governor, only to flee back to Monterey when Echeandía appeared on the battlefield near Santa Barbara with his own troops. The problem of the soldiers' pay remained unsolved.

A related problem was the Mexican policy of sentencing convicts to a life in California as punishment for their crimes. A substantial population of disreputable persons therefore roamed the province, foraging, stealing, fighting, and provoking consternation and resentment among the townspeople, whose protests, relayed by Echeandía, finally convinced the government to end the practice of dumping convicts in California. Echeandía, meanwhile, absorbed much of the blame for the trouble these criminals caused.

Within a year of his arrival, Echeandía was also confronted with the breakdown of the province's security on its eastern border. In 1826 an American mountain man, Jedediah Smith, led a party of fur trappers from the Rocky Mountains across the Mojave Desert to Mission San Gabriel, the first Americans to enter California from the east. Appalled by the precedent, Echeandía jailed Smith, refused him permission to hunt beaver in the province and, after weeks of indecision, ordered him to return to the United States. But, with good reason, he worried that Smith would be followed by others.

However, Echeandía devoted most of his attention to Indian affairs. He arrived in San Diego shortly after a serious Native revolt in the southern missions and only with difficulty persuaded the frightened padres to continue to clothe and feed the families of his soldiers. He also made a modest attempt to begin secularizing the missions, to the Franciscans' great dismay. Echeandía sympathized with the democratic principles of the revolution and the government's determination to integrate the Indians into Mexican society. Influenced by a report by the government's Commission for the Development of the Californias, he announced a plan in 1826 whereby certain Indigenous families might leave a few specified missions. As the mission fathers predicted, few left and Echeandía was further discouraged by accounts that those who did were incapable of an independent existence.

The fact that it took four more years for Echeandía to develop another plan for secularization reflected not



only the failure of his first attempt but also his realization that the missions supported two-thirds of the Mexican population of California, and that disruption of the system would be disastrous. It was a real dilemma: secularization of the missions seemed necessary in order to integrate the Natives into Mexican society; yet secularization could ruin the existing supply system. California could not grow if the mission system remained intact but seemingly could not survive without it. Echeandía issued a new proposal in January 1831, but before it could be implemented a new government came to power in Mexico and Echeandía was replaced.

The new governor, Colonel Manuel Victoria, contrasted sharply with his predecessor. Reactionary, militaristic, and ruthless, he had little faith in republicanism and little respect for the Californios. Reflecting the conservative, pro-clerical new regime in Mexico, he halted plans for secularization, refused to call the territorial *diputación* into session, and ruled in a dictatorial fashion, all of which offended the emerging local elite.

Victoria's harsh regime came to an end with the first of many "revolutions" of the period. On November 29, 1831, several prominent southern Californios issued a *pronunciamento* against Victoria, demanding that he be expelled and replaced by ex-Governor Echeandía. Victoria gathered a small band of soldiers and marched south to meet the rebels in combat. At Caluenga Pass, just north of Los Angeles, the opposing forces met and exchanged harmless volleys until one of the rebels, José María Avila, dashed forth, wounded Victoria with his lance, and killed the governor's aide before he himself was killed. Victoria made his way to the nearest mission, San Gabriel, where, on December 9, he arranged to turn his authority back to Echeandía. On January 17, 1832, after less than a year in office, he sailed for Mexico.

Having deposed Victoria, the Californios quarreled among themselves. Southern Californios, particularly Juan Bandini, Pío Pico, and José Carrillo, who had led the revolt against Victoria, were unhappy with Echeandía's assumption of both military and civil authority. The territorial *diputación*, meeting in Los Angeles, elected Pío Pico as governor, but Echeandía managed to overturn the appointment. Meanwhile, northern Californios led by Captain Agustín Zamorano (Victoria's former secretary, better known for bringing the first printing press to California) disputed Echeandía's return to power, and opposing "armies" were again in the field. Bloodshed was averted with a truce whereby Zamorano retained military command north of San Fernando while Echeandía commanded the area to the south.

The events in California convinced Mexican officials that experience was a highly desirable quality for their next appointee, and they found it in 40-year-old General José Figueroa, who was named governor on May 9, 1832. Figueroa had been *comandante general* of Sonora and Sinaloa and a judge in the Supreme Tribunal of War and Marine. He was proud of his Indian blood and sympathized with the liberal aims of the Mexican revolution. He was, without doubt, the most capable Mexican governor of California. Despite some shortcomings, his engaging personality and political abilities soon endeared him to prominent Californios, particularly in the north, where he assumed office in January 1833. He also won the support of southern Californios by issuing a proclamation of amnesty for all participants in the revolt against Victoria.

Figueroa's instructions emphasized promoting colonization, especially in the areas threatened by Russian or American activity. Accordingly, one of his first acts was to send Ensign Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo north to reconnoiter the Russian base at Fort Ross and to select a site for a presidio north of San Francisco. Vallejo, who then commanded the San Francisco presidio, was also authorized to grant land to qualified settlers who would move into the northern frontier. Within the next few years, Vallejo established the towns of Petaluma and Santa Rosa and directed the development of a substantial rancho economy in this area, effectively cutting the Russians off from expanding inland—a major factor in their decision to abandon Fort Ross at the end of the 1830s. In the process, Vallejo became one of the largest landowners in northern California.

Secularization of the Missions

The most pressing problem for Figueroa remained Indian policy and the future of the missions. As early as 1813 the Spanish government had ordered secularization of all missions that had been in existence for ten years, but the Mexican revolution had prevented enforcement of the decree. Almost immediately after independence, contradictory pressures built up in Mexico over ending the mission system. Idealistic followers of democratic revolutionary principles worked to make Natives throughout Mexico free citizens. Others, in league with Californios, hoped to appropriate the missions' lands, herds, and wealth for themselves. Mexico City was deluged with charges that the missions failed to assimilate the Natives and treated them cruelly.

Although the mission system had many flaws, much of the criticism was sheer hypocrisy, coming as it did

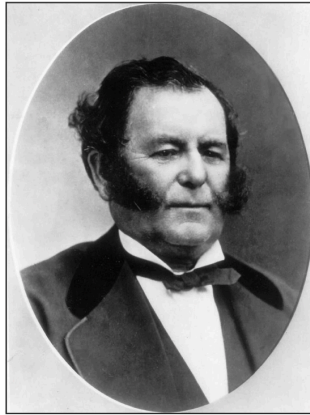
from California soldiers, civil officials, and a growing class of *rancheros*, who themselves exploited and abused Natives and were seeking even freer access to mission lands and neophyte labor. Nevertheless, because of confusion and conflict over their status and future, the missions were disintegrating by the time of Figueroa's appointment.

The Gómez Farías Plan

José Figueroa's arrival in Monterey coincided with another political change in Mexico. New elections in 1833 brought to power an unlikely coalition of military figures led by the unprincipled General Antonio López de Santa Anna and liberal democrats led by Valentín Gómez Farías. Although elected president, Santa Anna decided to spend a few months resting at his estate near Jalapa, leaving Vice President Gómez Farías as acting chief executive—the first civilian to govern Mexico since independence. For many years, Gómez Farías had favored integration of the Indians into Mexican society through secularization of the missions. He also shared the anxiety of many Mexicans about Russian encroachment on the weak California settlements. Seizing the opportunity afforded by Santa Anna's absence, he advanced a plan to combine secularization of the California missions with a colonization scheme to strengthen the settlements between San Francisco and Fort Ross.

The first step in this plan was a law, introduced in Congress in April and signed by Gómez Farías in August 1833, ordering the complete dismemberment, or secularization, of the Baja and Alta California missions. The clergy's temporal authority over the Indians was to be removed, the missionaries replaced by parish priests. A second bill, also introduced by the Gómez Farías government in April, provided a detailed plan for distribution of the vast properties of the missions, not only to the neophytes but also to a number of other groups, including soldiers, colonists, naturalized foreigners, and convicts. Significantly, those who already held land in the region were not included. The bill also dealt with the administration of the land and property distribution. Unfortunately, the proposed property-distribution bill was never adopted and the opportunity for an orderly secularization process coordinated with colonization was lost.

Gómez Farías not only saw colonization as an important adjunct to secularization, he also regarded it as an effective means of defense. Accordingly, he planned



Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo

Haughty and reserved, but honest and loyal, General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo controlled vast landholdings and the military compound at Sonoma. In Thomas O. Larkin's view he was "the most independent man in California." While Vallejo was not politically inclined, his support was critical to the ambitions of Juan B. Alvarado and José Castro. *Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.*

and organized a major expedition under the leadership of José María Hjar aimed at occupying mission lands on the northern frontier between San Francisco Bay and Fort Ross. Hjar, a friend of Gómez Farías from Guadalupe, was also appointed director of colonization and governor of California, to replace Figueroa on arrival in California. José María Padrés, also a friend of Gómez Farías and a familiar figure in California, was named second-in-command of the colony and appointed military *comandante* of California. The Hjar-Padrés expedition, consisting of some 250 people, left Mexico City in April 1834. Since the law outlining land and property distribution of secularized missions had not been



Q&A

adopted, Gómez Farfás gave Hjar a hastily drawn, but similar, set of instructions for implementing the secularization act of August 1833.

Secularization Under Figueroa

Meanwhile, Governor Figueroa, while anxious to carry out the intent of his own instructions for secularizing the missions, had doubts about the wisdom of wholesale emancipation of the Native peoples. Experience under Echeandía had been that the neophytes, when freed from the missions, soon lost their property and gravitated toward a degraded status as servants of local *gente de razón*. Father Narciso Durán, the leading Franciscan in California, persistently pointed this out to Figueroa in a campaign to prevent or delay secularization. Moreover, Figueroa, painfully aware that for 20 years the military and civil personnel and their families in California had survived only with the help of the missions, was reluctant to move precipitously. Nevertheless, under great pressure from Californios, who coveted mission lands, he referred the question to the territorial *diputación*, which with Figueroa's assistance drew up a plan that the governor issued on August 9, 1834.

This plan of secularization provided that ten missions would be converted to towns and the padres replaced by parish priests at once; six of the remaining eleven were to be secularized in 1835, and five in 1836. The plan also provided for distribution of land and property and for administration of the process. Unlike Gómez Farfás's plan, Figueroa's called for distribution of mission lands and property only to neophytes in grants to each family of 33 acres of cultivable land, whether irrigated or not, along with grants "in common" of "enough land to pasture their stock," an amount that the administration could increase or decrease. Also, it called for dividing one-half of the mission herds of livestock proportionately among the Indigenous families, with all surplus livestock and property remaining in the care of an appointee of the governor. Finally, it provided that the "emancipated" Natives, at the discretion of the governor, could be forced to work on the mission's undistributed lands. Thus the way was opened for the Californios to acquire mission lands while still partially retaining the mission supply system.

Figueroa's plan had hardly gone into effect when the governor received word that Hjar and half the members of his colony had landed at San Diego, while Padrés and the rest of the colonists were expected in Monterey momentarily. At the same time an overland courier from

Mexico City brought instructions from President Santa Anna, who had now taken over the government from Gómez Farfás, canceling Hjar's appointment as governor and Padrés's appointment as military *comandante*. Bitterly disappointed, Hjar and Padrés finally agreed to settle the colony in the Sonoma area, north of San Francisco. Although the colony was criticized for including too many people not suited for agriculture, California desperately needed the skilled craftsmen and schoolteachers who made up the majority of the colonists. In any event, the settlement in Sonoma went badly, and rumors abounded that a revolution was brewing.

Figueroa was not one to ignore such rumors, and his relations with Hjar and Padrés worsened with reports that they were plotting against his administration. Finally, in the spring of 1835, he ordered that all colonists be free to settle wherever they might wish, in effect dispersing the colony, and instructed Vallejo to arrest Hjar and Padrés and ship them back to Mexico. By May 1835, this had been done, and Figueroa was at work on a manifesto designed to explain his actions for posterity. Figueroa eventually resigned in poor health and turned his office over to the young José Castro. The ex-governor died in September 1835, shortly after completing his manifesto.

Despite the trouble over the Hjar-Padrés colony, secularization proceeded. Though Figueroa personally sought to protect Indian rights, he lacked funds and soldiers to enforce secularization on his own. Instead, he was forced to appoint leading *gente de razón* such as Pío Pico and Mariano Vallejo to oversee the distribution of mission assets. After Figueroa's death, his successors ignored the intentions behind secularization.

Predictably, local administrators and their supporters made off in most cases with the bulk of the missions' cattle, horses, equipment, and cash—in some instances even taking altar pieces and bells. Neophytes received allotments of land and livestock that were too small to support them. Encroaching *gente de razón* quickly forced neophytes to sell out, while local officials made little attempt to protect them. Even the respected William Hartnell, appointed *cistador de misiones* in 1839 to investigate complaints about secularization, could not halt the abuses and resigned bitterly after two years as the most fertile mission lands fell into the hands of local rancheros. The Indigenous peoples themselves participated in the destruction of the missions, having no love for a system that had kept them forcibly institutionalized. Many abandoned their lands and refused to work on the "surplus" mission lands. Although a few neophytes remained in the mission Indian pueblos, most

soon drifted away. Some congregated around towns and ranchos, where they were exploited as before. Others fled to the interior, resumed the Native life, and gave new impetus to the cultural revolution of gentle tribes. From the 1830s to the 1850s, many returned to the coast time and again, now leading Native cavalry attacks on the settlements and their herds.

The decline of the missions continued until the end of the Mexican period, and the failure of secularization to improve Indian-white relations stands as a stark illustration of the general failure of Hispanic Indian policy in California. Like Spain, Mexico had continued the disruption of coastal California Native societies but, despite the population decline caused by the ravages of European diseases, had failed to dominate interior groups. Thus Indian resistance and aggression effectively inhibited settlement of the interior, a critical factor in the success of the American frontier movement into California after 1840.

Political Turmoil

Figueroa's departure plunged the province into political turmoil once again. José Castro and Nicolás Gutiérrez each served a short term as acting governor until Mexico sent Colonel Mariano Chico to take the office in 1836. Chico was so impolitic—attempting to pass off his mistress as his "niece," for example—that he lasted only three months; another "revolution" sent him back to Mexico. His rejection also signified California's discontent with the new centrist government, which had suddenly discarded the liberal constitution of 1824. Gutiérrez followed Chico and was similarly ousted after a disagreement with Juan Bautista Alvarado, the dashing 27-year-old president of the *diputación*. Alvarado and José Castro collected a small "army" of 75 men, recruited Isaac Graham, an American ex-trapper running a distillery in the Pájaro Valley, and about 50 of his cohorts, and marched on Monterey. One cannon shot induced Gutiérrez to leave, whereupon the *diputación* elected Alvarado governor and Mariano Vallejo *comandante general*.

Upon assuming the governorship, Alvarado was soon involved in another conflict between forces from the north, led by José Castro, and the south, led by Alvarado's uncle, Carlos Carrillo. After one man had inadvertently been killed, Castro persuaded the southerners to accept a compromise, awarding them, in effect, a sub-governor (an arrangement authorized by Mexico's establishment of the *prefectura*, creating such an office). By 1838 the Mexican government had formally appointed Alvarado

as governor and Vallejo as *comandante general*, and California enjoyed relative political peace for the next four years. Under Alvarado, secularization was essentially completed, development of the rancho economy accelerated, and the hide-and-tallow trade continued to dominate that economy.

The Hide-and-Tallow Trade

The demise of the missions fundamentally changed California's economic development. By the time of secularization, the missions had established a flourishing cattle economy, controlling 10 million acres of land and counting in their herds some 400,000 head of cattle, nearly the same number of sheep, and tens of thousands of horses. Also, over the years the Franciscans had developed a modest trade with other parts of the Spanish empire in cowhides and the tallow rendered from animal carcasses. At the same time, a limited, clandestine trade with foreign fur traders and whalers had acquainted the outside world with the province's developing cattle economy. When the Mexican revolution disrupted California's communication with the rest of New Spain, this illicit trade increased. By the time of Mexican independence, the foundation had been laid for what became the key to the economic survival of Mexican California: the production of hides and tallow for export.

The decision of the new Mexican government to open California to trade with foreigners was crucial for the development of the hide-and-tallow trade. Mexico opened the ports of Monterey and San Diego to foreign ships, levying substantial duties on the goods they carried. Local officials soon relaxed these regulations in the interest of promoting increased revenues through increased trade. Thus Governor Argüello permitted company representatives to build storehouses on shore and carry on trade at many other points along the coast.

Resident foreign company representatives such as Hartnell and Gale played an essential role in the growth of the hide-and-tallow trade by linking California with British and American companies, particularly the growing leather-goods industry in and around Boston. The foreigners soon controlled most of the business aspects of the trade; by the mid-1830s, British and American trading ships were a permanent part of the California scene, while the region's economic ties to New England were strengthened.

The classic contemporary description of the California hide-and-tallow trade is Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, published in 1840. Dana was a 19-year-old Harvard student when he signed onto the



ship *Pilgrim*, which was bound for California, where he spent 16 months in the hide-and-tallow trade. *Two Years Before the Mast* grew out of this experience (and led, incidentally, to some important legal reforms concerning the treatment of sailors in the merchant marine).

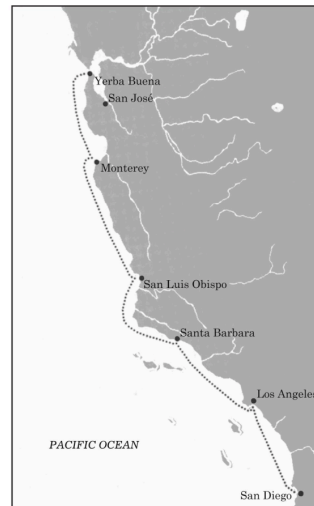
Dana described in vivid detail the process whereby ships put in at Monterey, paid duties on their cargo, and then plied the coast as "floating department stores." Small schooners made frequent runs between Hawaii and California, resupplying the trading ships and bringing native Hawaiians (Kanakas) to work as sailors and "hide droghers."

Ships such as the *Pilgrim* carried a vast array of goods. Gold thread, holy pictures, musical instruments, bells, and other items useful for religious services were brought to the mission fathers. For the Californios, Dana reported, the cargo consisted of "everything under the sun:"

We had spirits of all kinds (sold by the case), teas, coffee, sugars, spices, molasses, hardware, crockery, tinware, cutlery, clothing of all kinds, boots and shoes from Lynn, calicoes, and cotton from Lowell, crapes, silks; also shawls, scarfs, necklaces, jewelry, and combs for women; furniture; and, in fact, everything that can be imagined, from Chinese fireworks to English cart-wheels. . . .

The arrival of a company ship produced great excitement as local residents flocked to choose from its cargo and days of buying, selling, and entertainment followed. Eventually, foreign merchants such as Abel Stearns and Thomas Larkin established retail businesses that provided these goods year-round, but shipboard sales remained a fixture of the trade throughout the Mexican period. Most transactions were on credit, there being little currency available in California, and purchases were paid for in hides—"California banknotes," usually worth a dollar or two apiece—while resident "supercargoes" (company representatives) assembled hides and tallow at collection points along the coast.

Bringing the hides and tallow on board ship was a particularly difficult task, since San Francisco, San Diego, and Monterey were the only convenient harbors. Everywhere else, ships had to anchor three to four miles offshore while goods were ferried to and from the beach in small boats. Dana drew a memorable picture of hides piled on the beach and hide droghers carrying them, balanced on their heads, through the surf to the boats. The leather bags of tallow, called *botas*, were then loaded into the small boats and rowed out to the ship, exceedingly hazardous work in heavy seas.



Hide and Tallow Trade Ports of Call

Once collected along the coast, hides had to be cured. Accordingly, the trading companies maintained large warehouses at the safe harbor of San Diego, where the curing process began. San Diego was considered the best place on the coast for this work because southern California had the biggest missions and ranchos, and because cured hides could be loaded without getting them wet in the surf; once cured, hides would spoil if they became wet. Each raw hide was soaked in the ocean to soften it, and then pickled in a vat of brine, cleaned of fat and other residue, spread in the sun, scraped free of grease, and dried. Dana reported that each man in his crew cured 25 hides a day and noted their long faces when they were informed that the company's storehouse held 40,000 hides.

The hide-and-tallow trade became almost the sole source of revenue for the government, a fact that

accounts for the persistent efforts of southerners to get the capital and customs house moved to Los Angeles or San Diego. Unfortunately, it has been estimated that one-fourth to one-third of legitimate duties were evaded by smuggling. Nevertheless, the hide-and-tallow trade permitted the development of the rancho society that is so closely identified with the Mexican period. It provided almost all the manufactured items obtained by Californios, who had little incentive to develop domestic industry to replace mission industries, and enabled them to make raising cattle their sole means of support. With secularization of the missions, the ranchos produced most of the available goods and services, and the great rancheros became more firmly established as landed elite.

Rancho and Pueblo Society

The popular conception of life in Mexican California has probably been unduly influenced by descriptions of the almost feudal estates of the rancho class. Contemporary accounts, biographies, memoirs, popular histories, and modern-day films and pageants have all romanticized the "pastoral era" and engendered a stereotype built on the best features of life on the ranchos. This glowing picture has some basis in fact. These proud upper-class Californios created what historian Douglas Monroy has called a "seigneurial" culture in which "a pattern of submission, hierarchy, and obligation" governed relations between the rancheros and their women, children, and Indigenous laborers. They controlled huge tracts of land with thousands of head of cattle, horses, and sheep; their adobe homes were often very large and well furnished; they were attended by great numbers of Indian servants and *vaqueros*. They dressed splendidly and were lavish in their hospitality with much music, singing, and dancing. Weddings and fiestas were regarded as opportunities to display an openhanded generosity that symbolized their social status. For them, perhaps, it *was* an idyllic time.

But the great ranchos were few and far between. Society was dominated by a small elite consisting of the mission fathers, civil and military officials, and only a handful of large landowners, most claiming direct Spanish descent. Wealth, family influence, land, and ethnicity all served to distinguish them from the vast majority of the non-Indian population—the *mestizo pobladores* who were soldiers, ex-soldiers, colonists, and their families. Most of these settlers lived in the pueblos and presidio towns, where they owned lots on which they built small adobe homes and farmed adjacent

public land. Others lived on small grants of land, where they carried on subsistence farming. The men often worked as *vaqueros*, saddle makers, blacksmiths, and at other skilled pastoral trades. Families were small, with an average of three or four children, and all were expected to contribute to the needs of the family. For most Californios, it was a typically hard frontier life.

Women had much of the responsibility for the farming and livestock operations of this family-based economy, and often worked as seamstresses and cooks as well. Some women also worked at the missions, supervising kitchens and manufacturing of clothing or teaching neophytes domestic tasks. Such was the case for Victoria Bartolomea Reid, born to a prominent Tongva family (the Spaniards called the Natives who lived near the mission "Gabrieleños"). The missionaries gave her an Hispanicized name and education. Victoria met and married Hugo Reid, a Scottish merchant, who had settled in nearby Los Angeles in 1834. Four years later Mexico acknowledged Victoria's years of service to the church with a 128-acre parcel of land, in her own name. It was one of only a handful of tracts granted to a Native Californian by the Mexican government.

Secularization of the missions in the 1830s produced a significant change in the social structure of Mexican California. The process expanded the large landholding class, greatly weakening the church by stripping the missionaries of their influence. Indeed, by 1845 there were only six Catholic priests in Alta California. Thus, by the 1840s the ruling elite consisted of civil and military officials; an expanded class of great rancheros, some owning 200,000 acres of land or more; and a few leading merchants and other assimilated foreigners. Far below them in power and influence there also developed a significant class of *mestizo rancheros*—ex-soldiers, colonists, and others—who had received smaller grants of land for past services and who engaged in cattle ranching and subsistence farming on a significant but lesser scale. In the pueblos and presidio towns, the *pobladores* still constituted 60 to 80 percent of the non-Indian population and an important source of seasonal labor. At all times Native Americans were at the bottom of the social scale, performing almost all the manual labor on the ranchos and in the pueblos and acting as servants to the *gente de razón*.

The large ranchos were a natural outgrowth of the secularization of the missions and the government's desire to promote the hide-and-tallow trade. A few private land grants had been made in the Spanish period, some carved from mission lands for soldiers who married mission Indians. Most were sizable—such as the



Rancho Simi, a tract of more than 100,000 acres granted to an uncle of Pío Pico, and the Rancho San Pedro, a 75,000-acre area granted to Juan José Domínguez. Still, by 1820 only 20 such grants had been made, and there were probably no more than 50 by 1830. But between 1834, when secularization began, and 1846, more than 700 private land grants were made covering more than 8 million acres of land—this in itself was a measure of the fundamental economic and social change wrought by secularization. Under Mexican law, individual grants were limited in size to eleven square leagues, or nearly 50,000 acres, but since some rancheros owned more than one grant, there were some very large holdings.

The well-favored found it easy to obtain land. The applicant presented a petition to the governor, including a *diseño* (map) of the desired land, then set about marking the boundaries of the grant, a decidedly casual process. Riders, each trailing a lasso of a certain length, rode quickly from one identifiable object to another, making rough approximations of the distance between. Key points might be a creek bed, large tree, skull, or large rock, any of which might disappear or change position with time. Some grants were “floating grants,” a specific number of leagues that the grantee might locate anywhere within a large, vaguely defined area. Most rancheros were equally casual about complying with other grant requirements, such as occupying the lands, making improvements, and properly recording the grant, resulting in tragic loss for many of them when called on to prove title to their holdings after the gold rush.

A significant number of these ranchos were owned and operated by women. Some 60 grants, over 335,000 acres, were made to women, including the 4,449-acre Rancho Rodeo de las Aguas, of which María Rita Valdez de Villa was a joint grantee, and the 4,439-acre Rancho Purísima Concepción near San José, granted to Juana Briones de Miranda. Moreover, under Mexican law, married women retained ownership of any separate property possessed prior to marriage and were granted community property rights. Widows also controlled large ranchos. Doña Vicente Sepúlveda, for example, managed Rancho Los Palos Verdes for 30 years after the death of her husband. In Contra Costa María Manuela Valencia de Briones managed the Rancho Boca de la Cañada del Pinole. Both ranchos were more than 13,000 acres in size.

Many rancheros moved onto their land and built large adobe homes, architectural forerunners of the California ranch-style house. One-story, tile-roofed structures, with long covered porches and often an inner courtyard, they were usually built on a hill with plenty of open



Andrés Pico

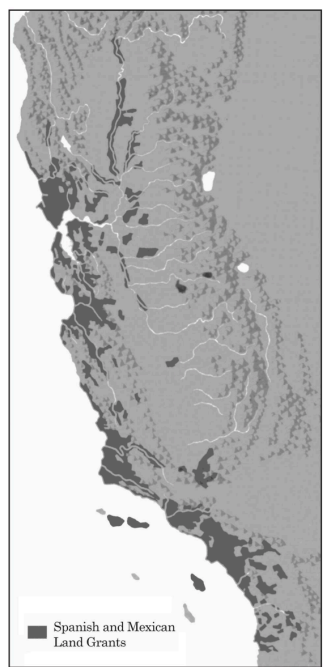
Pío Pico's brother, Andrés, dressed in the finery of the great ranchero. In the 1850s Andrés Pico served in the state legislature and authored the 1859 resolution dividing the state at the Tehachapi Mountains. The U.S. Congress, immersed in the slavery controversy, did not act on the proposal. *The History Collection / Alamy Stock Photo.*

space around as a precaution against raids by Natives from the Central Valley. Some were unusually large. The *casa* of Don Bernardo Yorba near Los Angeles, for example, reportedly consisted of 30 rooms plus another 21 for servants' quarters and workrooms. Well-to-do rancheros imported furniture and other fine articles from New England, while even the lesser rancheros

Search keywords

managed to have such luxuries as embroidered bedspreads and pillowcases. Many of the larger landholders lived in town while their more isolated ranchos were operated by relatives or mestizo *mayordomos* (ranch foreman or manager). These rancheros constituted from 10 to 20 percent of the non-Indian pueblo population and were frequently the chief local civil and military figures, as well as the social leaders of the province.

The ranchero was the unquestioned master of his estate. Fathers locked up unmarried daughters, arranged



marriages, and often controlled the lives of children after marriage. Yet there was a reciprocal obligation to treat women and children with respect and consideration, and women were provided legal protections against abusive husbands. Children were instructed in religious values and proper conduct from an early age. Disobedience and disrespect for one's elders were regarded as grave offenses. There was little formal education for young Californios, and most were illiterate or, at best, semiliterate. The sons of the rancheros, however, might be sent abroad for schooling. Daughters of any class were seldom provided such opportunities.

The work of the rancho focused on producing hides and tallow for export and food for its own personnel. During the annual rodeo, neighboring families rounded up cattle from the open range for identification and branding. The Californios, both men and women, were widely regarded as the best riders in the world. The rodeo, a major social event, was often accompanied by a gala celebration, with days of feasting, singing, and dancing. The men of the rancho usually conducted the great *matanzas* (slaughters). Cattle were driven to areas convenient for the transport of hides and tallow to the trading ships along the coast. There they were slaughtered and skinned, and their hides stretched out to dry. Meat was dried, and tallow melted and placed in skin bags. The remaining carcasses were left for wild animals. Guadalupe Vallejo, in reminiscing about his days at Mission San José, noted that many a serenade was broken up by grizzly bears wandering through the streets on their way to and from the mission's *calavera*, or slaughter corral.

While cattle were the main product of the ranchos, sheep and horses were abundant; sheep provided wool for cloth and blankets. In addition, a few hogs were raised, mainly for lard, since both Californios and Native people regarded pork with disfavor. The missions and pueblos—and to a lesser extent, the ranchos—also produced substantial quantities of wheat, using primitive methods. Iron-tipped wooden plows broke the soil, which was smoothed out with brush or tree branches after sowing. The wheat was harvested by hand and often threshed by dumping the cut wheat into a hard-packed corral and running horses around and around over it. The wheat was then winnowed by tossing it in the wind until the chaff blew away. This process could take many weeks.

Ranch women shared the burden of administering a sometimes extensive organization, managed a large corps of household workers, and participated in cattle drives and rodeos. Their daughters usually married in

Q&A

their teens and spent much of their young lives bearing children, many of whom died within six months. Still, among the rancho class, large families were not uncommon. Maria Teresa de la Guerra, daughter of José de la Guerra y Noriega, married William E. P. Hartnell and presented him with 18 children. Don José himself was survived by more than 100 descendants. Preparing food was also a major responsibility, and while all celebrations were accompanied by great feasts, Californios, as one writer noted, ate well at all times:

A family breakfast would include eggs or *frijoles* (beans) . . . coffee with rich cream, or chocolate, or tea, honey and tortillas. Dinner came at noon and

was a solid meal of beefsteak and boiled beef, stewed chickens or hash made of *carne seca* (dried beef) mixed with scrambled eggs, onions, tomatoes well seasoned and sprinkled with red chili pepper, beans prepared with plenty of gravy, tortillas, and *cino del país* (locally made wine). . . . Supper was slightly less solid . . . consisting of soup, roast duck perhaps, or richly flavored *guisado de carne* (beef stew), sweet potatoes, frijoles, and lettuce salad.

Male or female, young or old, the rancheros loved entertainment. Weddings, baptisms, feast days, rodeos, and visitors provided occasions for celebrations that sometimes lasted for days. Dancing, a special

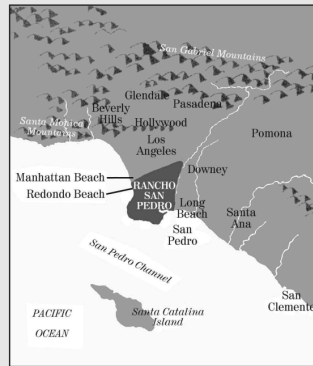
Rancho San Pedro

A Classic Spanish Land Grant

For many modern Californians, the state's Spanish-Mexican heritage evokes images of the great land grants that became the ranchos of the pastoral era. The vast majority of such grants were actually made under Mexican rule but most Californians still think of them as "Spanish land grants." Rancho San Pedro was one of the few genuinely Spanish land grants; indeed, it was the first in Alta California. Its history is closely linked to the history of Los Angeles.

The original grantee of Rancho San Pedro was Juan José Domínguez, a foot soldier with Portolá's 1769 expedition. Two years after he retired in 1782, he successfully petitioned his former commander, Governor Pedro Fages, for permission to use the grant to raise cattle. As was the custom, the permission included no specific title to the land. No survey or map of the grant was ever recorded. Domínguez and two friends marked out the tract, which generally included the area bounded on the east by the Los Angeles River, on the west and south by the ocean, and on the north by a line running from the present-day city of Compton to a point midway between Hermosa Beach and Redondo Beach. They described the line as "commencing at a large sycamore tree [on the] road leading from San Pedro to Los Angeles . . . thence running [westerly] to a stone placed near the high road," and so on. The description included the occasional "*un poco más o menos*" (a little more or less), estimating the amount of land involved—in this case, over 75,000 acres.

As Domínguez grew older, he left the management of his grant to others, which led to the kinds of disputes common among all California rancheros. For example, Domínguez argued constantly with his old (continued . . .)



Rancho San Pedro
The original extent of the Rancho San Pedro, outlined on a current map of Los Angeles.

friend, Manuel Nieto, who had obtained a neighboring grant, about their common boundary, the Los Angeles River. The waterway often changed its course during winter flooding, sometimes by as much as half a mile. Another conflict involved the Sepúlveda family, which had been granted permission by Domínguez's executor to pasture cattle in the western portion of Rancho San Pedro. The Sepúlvedas eventually carved more than 30,000 acres out of the Domínguez ranch, creating Rancho Los Palos Verdes for themselves. Domínguez's heirs, nephew Cristóbal and grandnephew Manuel, spent years petitioning the Mexican government for regranting of the original rancho and confirmation of their title. In 1846, a battle in the U.S.-Mexican War took place on the rancho. In the Battle of Domínguez Ranch, sometimes called the "Battle of the Old Woman's Gun," a group of Californios with a small cannon that had been hidden in an old woman's yard during the initial U.S. occupation of Los Angeles, beat back American troops attempting to retake the city. As was true of most for the region's large land holders, there were family squabbles over shares in the rancho and, after the American conquest, a long struggle for confirmation of title from the United States Land Commission. Shortly after war's end, part of the rancho was sold to Phineas Banning and some associates, eventually becoming San Pedro harbor. The first railroad in the area was built through Rancho San Pedro. In the 1920s the Domínguez Hills oil field, one of the richest in California, was discovered on the rancho, part of which in 1966 became the campus of today's California State University, Domínguez Hills.

Surprisingly, the Domínguez family has held on to much of Juan José's grant. Grandnephew Manuel, who served as mayor of Los Angeles and was a member of the 1849 constitutional convention, died in 1882, leaving his wife and daughters more than 24,000 acres of the Domínguez Rancho. Through judicious development, the family has retained control of a substantial portion until modern times, a rare circumstance that makes Rancho San Pedro not only one of California's oldest grants, but also one of the few to stay in the family. (RBR)

enjoyment, included the lively *jaramba* and the sedate *contradanza*. The more formal affairs on the ranchos were called *bailes*, while the less formal events were known as *fandangos*.

This elaborate way of life depended on an abundant supply of cheap Indigenous labor; large numbers of ex-neophytes performed most household duties. Mariano Vallejo's wife, Benicia, described her household staff as follows:

Each of my children, boy or girl, has a servant who has no other duty but to care for him or her. I have two servants for myself. Four or five grind the corn for the tortillas, for here we entertain so many guests that three grinders are not enough. Six or seven serve in the kitchen. Five or six are constantly busy washing the clothes of the children and servants, and nearly a dozen are required to attend to the sewing and spinning.

Ex-neophytes and gentle Indians performed the ranch work, while competent ex-neophytes sometimes acted as *mayordomos*, supervising the work of the Native labor force. Only a few were paid even a subsistence wage, while most worked simply for food and shelter. Many of the wage earners quickly lost their freedom to move. Because their purchases at the rancho *tienda* (store) frequently outpaced their meagre wages,

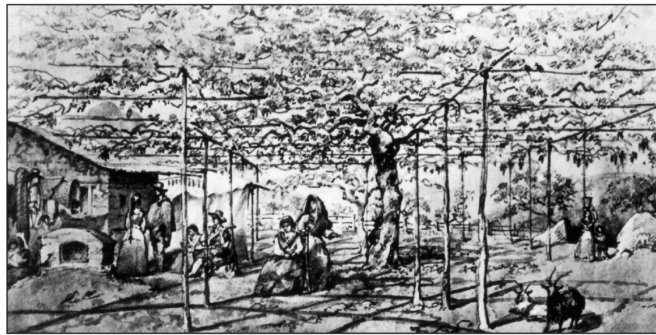
they often fell into a legal state of debt peonage, unable to leave their employer until they somehow managed to settle their accounts. Nevertheless, despite their lowly status, their importance cannot be ignored. Almost all foreign observers were quick to note the dependence of the rancho economy and way of life on the Indigenous people. The seeming indolence of the Californios, and their avoidance of all manual labor, merely reflected that dependence. On the other hand, many Indians, their culture and economy destroyed by European contact, were dependent on the ranchos for food and shelter. This mutual dependence was fundamental to the rancho economy and social system.

The expansion of trade after 1822 contributed to the growth of towns where hides and tallow were exchanged. Los Angeles and Monterey, surrounded by the most productive ranchos, became the respective centers of influence in the south and north, while San José developed as a prosperous pueblo in the San Francisco Bay region. (Yerba Buena, forerunner of the city of San Francisco, was not founded until 1835.) Santa Barbara, while relatively isolated, exported many hides.

The constitution of 1824 accorded each town, or pueblo, a representative *ayuntamiento*, or council, but the key figure remained the *alcalde*, who was not only the chief executive officer but also the chief judicial



Q&A



Doña Marcelina's Grapevine

This Edward Vischer drawing shows rancho life near Santa Barbara, with guitar players, strolling señoritas, and Indian servants—a way of life that lasted well into the 1870s. Ironically, southern California boosters chopped down this grapevine and sent the pieces east to advertise California's fertile soil. *The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.*

figure for the community. Most disputes were settled by the *alcalde* through a conciliatory process, although he referred more serious matters to the governor. The lack of a court system proved difficult for Americans to adjust to, but the *alcalde* was a respected figure and regarded as a true city father.

Town life, particularly in Los Angeles and Monterey, was rather more complicated than life on the remote ranchos. Here military and civil officials, and a growing population of merchants and prominent foreigners, shared power and status with those *rancheros* who maintained town houses. They dressed more fashionably and their social activities were more elaborate, although they displayed the same generosity and hospitality that characterized the country people.

In the pueblos and mission towns the non-Native population lived in small adobe buildings that usually had thatched roofs and earth floors, and, in many respects, they tried to emulate the life of the upper classes, although family size was generally smaller, averaging three to four children per family. They ate simple but plentiful food and enjoyed feasting, singing, and dancing. Bull and grizzly-bear fights, cockfighting, and horse racing were common entertainments in the pueblos. With secularization, substantial numbers of Natives

took up residence in squalid quarters, and pueblo life changed markedly. At one time, conditions in the Indian section of Los Angeles became so bad that the townspeople forced its removal across the river.

In spite of the stratified social structure of Mexican California there is a certain element of truth in historian Carey McWilliams's depiction of the *gente de razón*, the small non-Indian population, as "one big happy guitar-twang family." Religious ties, especially godparent relationships between members of different classes, a common culture, common social activities, and the nature of rancho life, all made for personal loyalties binding groups together. In this sense, California society attained a remarkable cohesion that transcended class status in many ways.

Mexican California thus remained, as in the Spanish period, much like an overseas colonial possession— isolated and neglected. Left to their own resources and absorbing much of the revolutionary ideology of the day, Californios made significant changes in their own religious and economic institutions, producing the great rancho society and cattle economy with all its romantic, as well as coercive, elements. Still, it remained very much a frontier society, and one that was soon to be challenged.