

Mexican California: The Heyday of the Ranchos

For a quarter century after the achievement of Mexican independence in 1821, California was a remote northern province of the nation of Mexico. Huge cattle ranches, or ranchos, emerged as the dominant institutions of Mexican California. Traders and settlers from the United States began to arrive, harbingers of the great changes that would sweep California during the Mexican American War of 1846-1848.

Life in Mexican California



After three centuries of imperial rule, the American colonies of Spain began to demand their freedom. Mexican independence was achieved in 1821 following a long and bloody struggle.

Life in California changed slowly. The most visible impact of Mexican independence was the secularization of the missions. The missions lost their lands and much of their power. In "dividing the spoils," Mexican administrators created huge cattle ranches or ranchos. A few wealthy land-owning families emerged as a rancho elite, while most of the labor was performed by California Indians serving as Native American serfs.

Native-born Californios grew restive under Mexican rule and in 1842 asserted the provincial autonomy of California. The autonomy was short-lived.

Most rancheros occupied themselves with trading hides and tallow for manufactured goods brought to California by ships from the United States. In their leisure hours, the Californios amused themselves with popular entertainments such as bull and bear fights or the festive celebration of a California wedding.

Mexican Independence



The same spirit of liberty that led British colonists to declare their independence in 1776 inspired Spanish colonists to assert their independence in the early 1800s. On the morning of September 16, 1810, a priest named Miguel Hidalgo made a fiery speech in the town of Dolores in New Spain. His words set off a long and bloody war to make New Spain an independent country.

During most of the war for Mexican independence, California remained uninvolved and unaffected. The only direct contact with the war came in 1818 when two "revolutionary" ships sacked and burned several settlements along the California coast. Three more years of fighting, all to the south of California, were necessary before Mexico achieved its independence in 1821.

When news of Mexican independence reached California the following year, the old red and gold imperial flag of Spain was lowered over the presidio at Monterey. A crisp new flag, bearing an eagle and a snake, rose in its place. As the flag unfolded in the breeze, the assembled soldiers shouted: "Viva la independencia Mexicana!"

Secularization of the Missions



The missions of California, like the missions on all Spanish colonial frontiers, were intended to be temporary institutions. When the work of Christianization and acculturation was finished, the missionaries were to be replaced by secular clergy and the mission lands distributed among the former neophytes. This process was known as secularization.

Following the establishment of Mexican independence in 1821, demands for the secularization of the missions intensified. The constitution of the Republic of Mexico endorsed the equality of all Mexicans regardless of race. Mexican liberals concluded that the missions--which denied basic liberties to the Indians--were unconstitutional.

The Indians themselves were becoming increasingly restive under mission rule. A coordinated revolt broke out in 1824 among Chumash neophytes at three of the

missions along the Santa Barbara Channel. Meanwhile, Native-born Californios saw the missions as an obstacle to the economic development of the province; they believed that the missions' control of prime agricultural lands and the indigenous labor force retarded the growth of private ranches and farms.



In 1834 Governor José Figueroa issued a proclamation ordering the secularization of the California missions.

Dividing the Spoils



According to the 1834 secularization proclamation of Governor José Figueroa, half the property of the California missions was to be distributed to the former mission Indians.

Unfortunately most Indians did not receive any of the mission lands; those who did rarely kept them for long. Lorenzo Asisara, a former neophyte at Mission Santa Cruz, later remembered that during secularization his people were given some "old mares that were no longer productive and very old rams." They also received a portion of the mission lands, "but it did not do the Indians any good."

Between 1834 and 1836 each of the twenty-one California missions was secularized. Governor Figueroa, who died in the midst of the secularization proceedings, appointed administrators to supervise the disposal of mission properties. The administrators sold off the cattle, grain, and lands that rightly should have gone to the former neophytes. The vast bulk of the mission properties ended up in the hands of a few prominent Californio families.

The final blow to the missions came in 1845 when cash-strapped Governor Pío Pico auctioned off the remaining mission properties--including the crumbling mission churches. One dispirited padre lamented: "All is destruction, all is misery, humiliation and despair."

The Rancho Elite

A small group of rancho families, mostly California-born, emerged as the new elite of Mexican California. Their wealth and power was based on the enormous ranchos they acquired from the Mexican government. Each rancho grant was accompanied by a *diseño* or map. The maximum legal limit for a private rancho grant was 11 square leagues--about 50,000 acres. Not even this generous limit

was always applied; some individuals received multiple grants.

Typical of the new elite was Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, grantee of several ranchos in present-day Solano and Sonoma counties. Born in Monterey, Vallejo became the most prominent land-owner in northern California. From his casa grande in the new pueblo of Sonoma, Vallejo ruled over a feudal barony of vast lands, herds of cattle, and a large retinue of Indian laborers.

The rancharo oligarchy was divided by personal, factional, and sectional disputes. Rivalries between norteños and sureños foreshadowed later disagreements between northern and southern Californians in the twentieth century.

Native American Serfs

The ranchos of Mexican California depended upon the labor of Native Americans. A typical California rancho might employ as few as twenty or as many as several hundred Indian workers. The Native work force totaled perhaps four thousand in all, including both former mission Indians and new recruits gathered by the rancheros.

The Native workers tended the fields and herds of the ranchos. Some became highly skilled cowhands or vaqueros. In return for their labor the Indians usually received nothing more than shelter, food, and clothing. The rancheros used various means of coercion--persuasion, economic pressure, violent force--to recruit and maintain their labor supply.

The Indian workers were nominally free, but in practice they were bound to the service of the rancharo as long as he cared to hold them. Thus rancho society of Mexican California was essentially a feudal society. The rancheros ruled as lords on their great landed estates; the Indian workers who tended the fields and herds were their serfs.

Provincial Autonomy



During the years of Mexican sovereignty, California was ruled by a governor appointed by officials in faraway Mexico City. A provincial legislature, or diputación, met in Monterey but its powers were strictly limited.

Politics in Mexican California were turbulent and often chaotic. In one five-year period, from 1831 to 1836, California had eleven different gubernatorial administrations--not counting three hapless individuals who were appointed to the governorship but whom the Californians did not permit to take office. The native-born Californios grew discontented with Mexican rule and sought greater control over their own affairs.



The most dramatic assertion of Californio discontent was the "revolution" led by Juan Bautista Alvarado in 1836. Alvarado, president of the diputación, seized control of the capital in Monterey and deported most of the Mexican officials. On November 7, 1836, he proclaimed California "a free and sovereign State."

The revolution was short-lived. The Mexican government in 1837 offered Alvarado the governorship of California. He accepted the offer.

Trading Hides and Tallow



The economy of Mexican California was based on the raising of huge herds of cattle. Skilled vaqueros or cowhands periodically rounded up the cattle, slaughtered them, stripped and cleaned the hides, and stretched the hides in the sun to dry. The hides were a valuable source of leather for making saddles, shoes, and other products. Fat from the cattle was boiled in iron pots until it melted into a fatty liquid called tallow. The tallow was used to make soap and candles.

The rancho elite traded hides and tallow for manufactured goods from foreign traders who sailed along the coast. In the following account, Prudencia Higuera recalled a time in 1840 when a ship from the United States sailed into San Pablo Bay to trade for hides and tallow:

"The next morning my father gave orders, and my brothers, with the peons, went on horseback into the mountains and smaller valleys to round up all the best cattle. They drove them to the beach, killed them there, and salted the hides. They tried out the tallow in some iron kettles.... The captain soon came to our landing with a small boat and two sailors.... The captain looked over the hides, and then asked my father to get into the boat and go to the vessel.... [My father] came back the next day, bringing four boat-loads of cloth, axes, shoes, fish-lines, and many new things. There were two grindstones, and some cheap jewelry. My brother had traded some deerskins for a gun and four tooth-brushes, the first ones I had ever seen."

Bull and Bear Fights

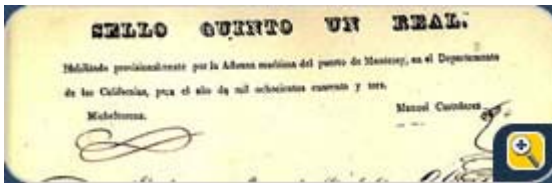


Among the popular pastimes of Mexican California were horse races, bull fights, and bull and bear fights. For the latter, fearless vaqueros would capture a California grizzly bear, take him to a bull ring, and tie or chain his hindleg to the foreleg of a long-horned California bull. Spectators would then place their bets, sit back, and wait for the swatting, goring, and biting to begin. Whoever survived the fight was declared the winner.

The nephew of ranchero Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo offered the following play-by-play account of one such contest:

"The bull began the fight by charging the grizzly with his horns. A blow from the grizzly's paw did not stop the onset. In a moment they were rolling over each other in the dust. But the bear finally, though badly gored, got his teeth fastened into the bull's neck, and bull was pulled to his knees. The bull's tongue hung out. This was what the bear wanted. He got his claw into the bull's mouth, pulled the tongue out still further, and then bit it off. With this the bull gave up the contest, and soon after both animals were dispatched."

California Wedding



The rancho elite of Mexican California was noted for its prodigal hospitality and spirited entertainments. Singing and dancing were passions for Californios of all ages.

Wedding festivities among the elite Californio families lasted from three days to a week or more, and for each event the bride usually wore a different outfit. To her wedding breakfast, she might wear a dress of brightly colored silk or satin; then change into a low-cut, short-sleeved gown of delicate pink or blue for the afternoon activities. For the actual wedding itself, the bride wore black. Her gown was often of silk brocade, with silk stockings and satin slippers. She wore her hair piled high on her head, accented by a beautiful tortoise-shell comb set

with precious stones, and highlighted by an elegant black Spanish lace mantilla.

Harbingers of Change

During the years California was ruled by Mexico, visitors and settlers from the United States arrived in ever greater numbers. These interlopers were harbingers of the change in sovereignty that would come to California with the Mexican American War.

The earliest visitors from the United States were sea-otter hunters who sailed along the California coast. The story of "Jedediah and the Beaver" reminds us that the first group of Americans to arrive overland came in search of beaver pelts in California's great Central Valley. New Englander Richard Henry Dana was among those who came to take advantage of the California's penchant for trading hides and tallow for imported manufactured goods.

The first wagon train of overland settlers from the United States arrived in California in 1841. The perils of the Donner Party while attempting to cross the Sierra Nevada starkly revealed the dangers of the overland trail--dangers that would take the lives of countless others in the years ahead.

Official United States interest in acquiring California grew steadily in the 1840s. The Jones Incident of 1842 was an embarrassing prelude to the far more decisive events of the upcoming war between Mexico and the United States.

Sea-Otter Hunters



The first visitors from the United States to come to California were men engaged in hunting sea otter along the western coast of North America. The skin of a full-grown sea otter was five feet long and more than two feet wide, with a thick, black, glossy fur highlighted by silvery hair. A pelt's value when shipped to the Chinese port of Canton was about \$300. Sea otters could be found at many points along the coast from the Aleutians to Baja California, and some of the greatest concentrations were in the bays and channels of Alta California.

Ebenezer Dorr, captain of the aptly named ship the Otter, sailed along the California coast in 1796 and collected hundreds of sea-otter pelts. Dorr put into Monterey for fresh supplies of water and wood, but Spanish mercantile restrictions prohibited him from engaging in any trade.

Other American ships followed the lead of the Otter. They occasionally defied Spanish prohibitions and engaged in clandestine trade with local otter hunters. Trading was encouraged by local officials only after the achievement of Mexican independence in 1821, but by then the sea otter had been nearly exterminated along the coast of California.

Jedediah and the Beaver

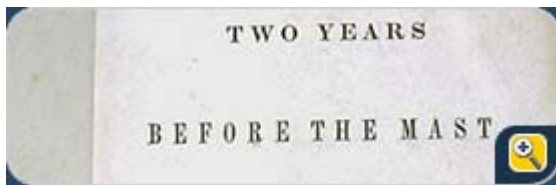
On November 26, 1826, Jedediah Strong Smith, leader of an expedition of American beaver trappers, reached Mission San Gabriel after an arduous crossing of the Mohave Desert and the San Bernardino Mountains. Smith and his party were the first white men from the United States to cross overland to California, thereby effectively opening the fur trade of the far Southwest.

California Governor José María Echeandía was perplexed by Smith's arrival. Suspecting that he was a spy, the governor ordered Smith arrested. He was released only after promising to leave California.

As Smith traveled northwestward over the Tehachapis and into the southern Central Valley, he found a trapper's paradise. There he collected a large quantity of pelts and then turned eastward and left California by way of Ebbetts Pass. Smith thus accomplished the first recorded European-American crossing of the Sierra Nevada.

Smith shared with other trappers the story of his successful hunting in California. One trapper later recalled that he "reported California to be the finest country in the world--having a charming Italian climate & a soil remarkably productive...& Beaver were abundant in all the Creeks & Rivers."

Richard Henry Dana



The hide and tallow trade was important not only for its immediate economic effects but also because the writings of men engaged in the trade greatly heightened American interest in California.

On board the ship Pilgrim in 1835 was a young Bostonian named Richard Henry Dana. For eighteen months, Dana and his shipmates collected hides along the California coast. He also made close observations of California's land and people.

When Dana returned to New England, he published his recollections in Two

Years Before the Mast (1840). He described for his countrymen in precise detail the beauties of the California landscape, its capacious harbors, abundant wildlife, and salubrious climate "than which there can be no better in the world." He was contemptuous of the Californios, "an idle thriftless people" who could "make nothing for themselves." He was amazed that they bought "bad wine made in Boston and brought round by us" when their own country abounded in grapes. "In the hands of an enterprising people," he concluded, "what a country this might be!"



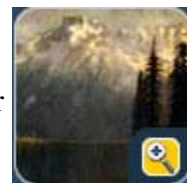
The Donner Party



Among the several parties of overland pioneers that come to Mexican California, none suffered more hardships than the Donner party. The party was organized in Springfield, Illinois, and made good time in the early spring of 1846 as it headed westward across the plains. It later lost valuable time by taking what was believed to be a shortcut south of the Great Salt Lake.

The Donner party began its ascent of the Sierra Nevada in October and had the misfortune of being caught near the summit during the heaviest snowfall in thirty years. As the snow reached a depth of more than twenty feet, the group lived in crude log cabins and lean-tos. When food provisions ran out, first the pack animals were eaten, then the hides and the boiled leather from their snowshoes, and finally the flesh of those who died. Only about half of the eighty-seven members of the party survived the winter.

There was heroism as well as horror during that terrible winter in the Sierra. James Reed left the party to seek help and returned leading a relief expedition. When rescuers arrived, Tamsen Donner refused to leave her husband George who was too weak to travel. Their three daughters were saved, but George and Tamsen died.



The Jones Incident

One of the strangest episodes in California history was the premature invasion of Monterey by a squad of United States Marines in 1842.

It all started when Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, an impetuous young

naval officer, got wind of a rumor that the United States and Mexico were at war. Jones was under standing orders that, in the event of such a war, he was to set sail and seize Monterey, the capital of Mexican California.



On October 18, Commodore Jones sailed confidently into Monterey Bay and demanded that the Mexican officials surrender. The next morning, a triumphant Jones landed 150 marines and sailors on the beach. The marines lowered the Mexican flag, raised the Stars and Stripes, fired a salute, and proclaimed California to be under the benevolent protection of the United States of America.

Unfortunately, Commodore Jones had made a big mistake. He soon learned that the war rumor was false. With all the dignity he could muster, Jones hustled his marines back on board his ship and sailed away.

Four years later, the military forces of the United States again invaded California. But this time it was for real, and the conquest was permanent.

Mexican American War

The United States in 1846 declared war on Mexico, and during the course of that war American military forces seized California. The war was fueled in part by feelings of Manifest Destiny, a popular sentiment in the United States that viewed the expansion of the nation as an inevitability.

The arrival in Mexican California of John C. Frémont, a loose cannon, sparked a rebellion by Anglo-Americans in the province. Their uprising became known as the Bear Flag Revolt, although the image on their banner resembled more a pig than a bear.

Military forces from the United States soon landed along the coast and marched into the interior. The Californios fought well against the Americans, scoring a victory with their long lances at San Pascual. Ultimately, however, the Mexican forces were defeated in far larger engagements elsewhere. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and the cession of vast lands from Mexico to the United States. This treaty and transfer marked the end of Mexican sovereignty in California.

A Loose Cannon

A "loose cannon" is someone whose actions often are unrestrained and impulsive. Lieutenant John C. Frémont, an officer in the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, fit this definition perfectly. He arrived in Mexican California in 1846 with sixty armed men, all expert marksmen.

The Bear Flag Revolt



The California state flag commemorates an event that occurred in the little town of Sonoma on Sunday morning, June 14, 1846.

A band of some thirty rough-hewn American settlers seized Colonel Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo and informed him that he was a prisoner of war. The Americans proudly proclaimed that theirs was a war for the independence of California. In front of Vallejo's casa grande, the rebels hoisted a flag emblazoned with a crude drawing of a bear, a lone star, and the words "CALIFORNIA REPUBLIC."

The original bear flag was made by William Todd, nephew of an up-and-coming Illinois attorney named Abraham Lincoln. Todd used a three-by-five piece of white cotton cloth. Along the bottom he sewed several strips of red flannel taken from either a man's shirt or a woman's petticoat. He then painted a five-pointed red star in the upper left-hand corner and drew a picture of a California grizzly bear. But William Todd clearly was no artist. His grizzly looked more like a pig than a bear.

Shortly after the arrival of United States naval forces along the California coast, the Stars and Stripes replaced the Bear Flag over Sonoma. The life of the "California Republic" thus ended on July 9, less than a month after it had begun. The main result of the Bear Flag Revolt--an event that would later be fantastically romanticized--was an unnecessary embitterment of feelings between Anglo-Americans and the Spanish-speaking Californios.

Lances at San Pascual



Following the outbreak of the Mexican American War in 1846, military forces from the United States invaded Mexico. Naval forces landed along the coast of California in July and proclaimed that "henceforward California will be a portion of the United States."

California's Mexican leaders denounced the invasion and mobilized their forces against the Americans. On August 9, 1846, Colonel José Castro called upon his

fellow Californios "to give to the entire world an example of loyalty and firmness, maintaining in your breasts the unfailing love of liberty, and eternal hatred toward your invaders! Long live the Mexican Republic! Death to the invaders!"

Treaty and Transfer



Fighting in California during the Mexican American War ended with the surrender of Andrés Pico to John C. Frémont on January 13, 1847, at Cahuenga Pass in present-day Los Angeles County. The meeting was arranged by Bernarda Ruiz, a woman in Santa Barbara who was saddened by all the bloodshed in her country. Fighting elsewhere in Mexico continued for another year.

The war formally ended on February 2, 1848, with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In the treaty, the United States agreed to pay Mexico \$15 million and to assume unpaid claims against Mexico. For its part, Mexico agreed to transfer to the United States more than 525,000 square miles of land. From this vast area would come the future states of California, Nevada, and Utah, most of Arizona and New Mexico, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming.

The Mexican American War was a great tragedy for Mexico. Under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico transferred half of its land to the United States. For the American people, the war was a great victory. Many Americans believed that their nation at last had achieved its Manifest Destiny.