

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Gold: **Mexican-Americans in California in the 19th century**

Introduction: Timeline

- before 1821 Spanish colony
- 1821-1846 Mexican colony
- 1846 Bear Flag Revolt
- 1846-48 Mexican-American War
- 1848 Gold discovered
- 1848 California becomes part of US
- 1849 Constitutional convention in Monterey
- 1850 California becomes state
- 1850-54 California capitals in Benicia, Vallejo
- 1854 Sacramento becomes California capital

I 1822-1846: The “Golden Age Of Ranchos”

Background: Prior to 1821:

1. Origin of Ranchos: Prior to 1821, Spain granted huge tracts of land as a reward to 20 military brass, hoping they would settle land and keep it safe for Spain. The requirement was that the land holder herd at least 2,000 cows and hire cowboys to tend them.)
2. Mexican pioneer story to match the Pilgrims: In 1775-76, while the Revolutionary War was beginning, 200 Mexican people of both sexes and all ages walked from Mexico City to California via Arizona. In just over 2 months, they walked 1600 miles! In the subsequent 17 days, they walked 400 additional miles, from LA to Monterey. Only one person died en route, a woman giving birth.

Overview: Californios 1821-1848:

Mexicans had lived in California since late 1700's and were well established but sparsely settled on far-flung ranchos. A few lived in towns (pueblos) that grew up near the former forts (presidios) and churches (missions). Californios (Mexican citizens living in California) became accustomed to running local governments without interference from a central authority, much like the Town Councils did in New England. In the process, Californios developed a taste for self-government, as well as frustration about their lack of representation in the governing body in faraway Mexico. Influenced by the same 18th century enlightenment philosophers that inspired the Yankee revolutionaries, the Californios favored a republican government. They did not understand capitalist enterprise, however, but favored an aristocratic, feudal-style agricultural economy based on honor, trust, and trade without money. In the early 1800's Anglo and Euro

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immigrants began to move to California. Californios were uneasy about the Yankees, who married their daughters, were not Catholic, and whose capitalism and land-grabs threatened the rancho way of life. But until the Gold Rush, Yankee numbers were small enough to present little actual threat.

1. **Feudal-style system of Ranchos:**

- Native or ex-soldier laborers
- Village of workers outside adobe house of owner
- Laborers not slaves but cannot own land and are kept poor, in fact, like serfs
- Mexican govt. in 1834 gave mission land (800 million acres) to 600-800 Mexicans
- Rancho owners ruled themselves and largely ignored faraway Mexico govt.
- Federation of nobility; loyalty and honor important
- Festivals called fiestas were temporary 'equalizers' of nobles and serfs

2. **Political power republican**— in theory -- in practice more like an oligarchy of the landowners: There were town councils of elected reps and a California legislature of elected officials, but they almost never convened. Government instability and rivalry among leaders contributed to political unrest. There was a frequent turnover of governors appointed by Mexico. The years between 1830-40 were very inharmonious but without open warfare.

3. **Social and class differences.** Elite (between 5-10% of total population) rancheros controlled the government, economy, and culture. They called themselves Spaniards to create a myth of cultural superiority but most were mestizos. The Mexican (non-Indian) population was ca 6,000 in 1846. The large majority (everyone not a landowner) lived in coastal towns and settlements adjacent to ranchos.

4. **Men who were not rancheros:** worked as subsistence farmers, skilled vaqueros (cowboys), or in trades related to herding. Most people in pueblos (towns) owned small private lots and homes, grazed and farmed the adjacent common land (ejido) granted to all. Men who did not live at a rancho or work as cowboys were often hired for seasonal work in rodeos (roundups) and matanzas (slaughters). At the bottom of society were the remaining mission Indians (ca 15,000 in 1834). The Indians did the most menial labor on ranchos and were often little more than slaves, paid in scanty clothing and alcohol. Some rancheros (rancho owners) treated Indians well but most did not. Many Mexicans intermarried with Indians.

5. **Women:** on the northern frontier of California, Sonoma County (the location of the rancho in Luckless Gulch,) women worked hard and were keystones of the family. Even wealthy rancheros' wives worked all day, overseeing domestic duties, household production (weaving, making clothing, candle-making, etc.), and the production of some agricultural crops. In fact, the rancho's wife often worked far harder than her husband. In towns, women often worked on a family farm and also earned wages as low level domestic servants or teachers.

Women were also folk healers, curanderas.**

Women worked alongside men in the fields and pastures in a collective environment that required all family members, including children, to contribute food to the household. Men controlled the secular and religious institutions and dominated the families, but women ran the house, educated the children, and had property rights, both private and community, that Anglo women did not have in American states during this era.

** I did not know this when I wrote Luckless Gulch, but Estrella's talent as a folk healer of animals is in keeping with a Mexican tradition of female healers

6. **Social unity:** in spite of distance and divisions, Californios were tightly bound to each other. Families had to rely on each other; few ever lacked food, shelter, or basic needs. "God parents" kept bonds among families of all classes, often across classes. Respect, patronage, and hospitality codes helped to preserve unity. Californios were also tied by bonds of religion and language, plus shared cultural heritage.
7. **Self-sufficiency of ranchos:** cheese-making, tanning of sheep and calf skins; weaving of blankets or other cloth; wine-making; grain-raising, grinding, and baking; amassing tallow and hides for trading. Field crops were grown for use on the rancho, rarely for trading.

II June 14, 1846: Increased Yankee Immigration And Anti-Mexican Bias Lead To The "Bear Flag Revolt,"

The 'revolt' was a raid by a handful of soldiers (not all Americans, or members of the US Army). They were directed by Captain John Fremont of the US Army, who was on an official trip to conduct land surveys, and who acted without the knowledge or authority of his commanders. Captain Fremont was staying at Sutter's Fort (Sacramento) when he heard rumors that there was soon to be a war against Mexico. Fremont decided to launch the war himself. He ordered a small group of soldiers to raid Vallejo's home in Sonoma, kidnap Vallejo and a few other Mexican Army officials, and imprison them at Sutter's Fort. Fremont kept the men locked in a room so small they couldn't move about freely, for 6 weeks, without a chance to talk to their captor. Fremont was later court-martialed for his unlawful assault; though he managed a presidential pardon and is often portrayed as a hero for his initiative in the 'revolt'.

During Vallejo's captivity, Vallejo's wife, Francisca and children were trapped in their house, while the Bear Flaggers raided their pantry, fields, and stables, and quickly drank away Vallejo's large wine cellar. Francisca stoically fed the Bear Flaggers as well as a large number of frightened neighbors who sought protection under her roof. Word of the raid spread through northern California, and three friends of Vallejo set out to bring food and comfort to Francisca, but Fremont saw them en route to Sonoma and ordered his men to kill them. This murder inflamed racial hatred – in both directions.

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The Bear Flag revolt was barbarous and unlawful and did nothing to advance California's entry into the United States. It was a particular irony that Fremont targeted Vallejo, a staunch American ally and advocate for California statehood.

The Bear Flag revolt was unnecessary at any rate, for unknown to the Bear Flaggers, the US had already declared war against Mexico on May 13, 1846. But the news took until mid-July 1846 to reach California. Vallejo's family rejoiced when the bear flag came down in front of their house, and the US Flag was raised. Finally, on August 1, Vallejo was freed. The Vallejos, great fans of the US, assumed that their lives would now return to normal, and that they would work hand-in-hand with Yankees in California (mostly military personnel at this time) to create a new, republican government.

Vallejo wanted the US to make California a state, but some Mexican-Americans opposed the change. A series of skirmishes between Mexican and American soldiers dragged on for almost two years and finally ended with the capitulation of Mexico and the subsequent treaty of Hidalgo, ceding California to the US on February 2, 1848.

Mexicans welcomed provisions in the Treaty of Hidalgo to protect existing property rights of Mexican-Californians; but these were later erased by Congress.

III 1848-1850: Interim In Which California A 'Part' Of The US But Not Yet A State And Had No Government Or Laws

Summary: The same years that were the first two years of the Gold Rush were also, by a strange and unfortunate coincidence, the two years when California was not yet a state, and had no elected government or laws. (The California "Governor" at this time was a military appointee and had no real role.) While the US Congress argued for years about California Statehood, Vallejo and other Californios joined with other California leaders, and took matters into their own hands. They held a convention to determine California's status and create an interim government. Most importantly, they wrote a State Constitution.

- Sept-Oct 1849: Monterey Constitutional Convention had 8 Californios representatives; the last time until the late 20th century that Latinos in California played a major role in California state politics
- Californios contributions: women's property ownership rights; laws to be published in Spanish and English; civil liberties
- Vallejo served on four committees. Vallejo was one of the most qualified people present, having read and studied the US Constitution and Jefferson's Manual of Parliamentary Practice. He offered to pay out of his own pocket for three commissioners to draft a basic code of laws for California's new government.

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- October 13, Monterey Constitution signed. At this point there were four weeks for candidates to campaign for election to the new California Senate created by the Constitution
- On November 13, 1849, Vallejo was elected a State Senator. He served on 7 committees and was gone from home most of the time for several years, working to make the new State government a success. Meanwhile, his farm and personal finances suffered greatly, as squatters stole his land, livestock, and crops, and the new-arriving Yankee lawyers declared his land grants invalid.

On September 9, 1850, congress admitted California as the 31st State.

IV 1850-1900: The Gold Rush And Californios

Summary: Mexican-Americans' experience of the Gold Rush was very different from that of Anglo settlers. Most Californios felt overwhelmed by the surge of new people. While Anglos achieved remarkable economic growth, Californios suffered dramatic economic decline and became politically powerless. They lost their land holdings and with their land, their opportunity for self-sufficiency. In 1850, over 64% of Californios owned land worth more than \$100 (in 1850 dollars). By 1860, only 29% owned land. In 1870, 21% owned land, and in 1880-90, only 5% owned land. Mexicans struggled to hold onto the only thing left: their traditional culture.

1. Gold Rush and the cattle industry: boom and bust

- Ranchos initially did well due to the influx of the gold rush population who bought their beef, but success didn't last long. In an effort to supply the new settlers, Rancheros increased herds, which led to overgrazing.

Second, Anglos imported superior beef cattle from outside the state.

Finally, Anglos stole both cattle and land from Rancheros.

When the Gold Rush waned after a few years, there was a glut of cattle, lowering their value to almost nothing. And legal fees (to try to keep land that had been stolen) made it impossible for rancheros to buy supplies or pay workers. Desperate, rancheros who still owned any land deeded it away to get money, a process speeded by unscrupulous lawyers.

On top of everything else, floods in 1862 drowned cattle, followed by a 3-year drought. Rancheros couldn't afford US and California taxes suddenly levied on them, and once again borrowed money, at usurious interest rates.

- Rancheros' longstanding land claims were usually declared invalid by unscrupulous government officials, lawyers, and the courts—all the way up to and including the US Supreme Court.

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- Result:
 - Economic depression, unemployment, and poverty for most Mexican/Americans.
 - Anglo population of California swelled from 620,000 in 1870 to 1.5 million in 1900, while Californios population remained stable. Mexican/Americans became a small and voiceless minority in the last half of the 19th century.
 - One example: Santa Cruz Mexican-Americans numbered ca 290 in 1845, and 290 again in 1880. In 35 years, their population stayed the same, while the Anglo population rose quickly.

In 1845, the 290 Mexicans of Santa Cruz represented 56% of the overall population; but in 1850, 290 Mexicans comprised 25% of the overall population, and in 1880, only 10%.

2. Californios in the North: gold rush destroyed any possibility of a smooth transition from Mexican to American state

- Mexicans were driven from diggings, harassed and assaulted. ‘Foreigner’s Tax’ and other discriminatory legislation and violence drove Californios away from the gold fields.

Californios landowners were defenseless; the California Land Law of 1851 was designed to invalidate Spanish and Mexican land grants. Men such as Vallejo went all the way to the Supreme Court, where he lost his suit in one of the most discriminatory decisions in the history of the Supreme Court.

- Anglo lawyers tricked Californios, who didn’t understand the US law system, into signing leases that turned out to be mortgages they couldn’t afford, then forced the Californios to pay the lawyers for land they already owned. Combined effects of litigation, squatters, unscrupulous lawyers and bankers threw nearly all Californios off their own land and reduced them to poverty.
- Racial violence against Californios was commonplace, including lynching and mob action. A tiny handful of Californios bandits, such as the legendary Joaquin Murrieta, were cited as justification for violence against Californios in general.
- Northern California society was transformed by Gold Rush so quickly that Californios had no time to adjust or respond in any systematic way.

3. In the South: Impact of Gold Rush slower, Californios society intact until 1860s

- Fewer Anglos came south until 1860s. In the first few years of the Rush, Southern California Rancheros posted profits on cattle. But the painful decade of 1850-60 followed the same trend as in the North: Californios saw their region slowly invaded by ‘foreigners’ who didn’t respect them. Anglo newcomers viewed Californios as ‘backward,’ standing in the way of progress and Americanization.

- Violence in South: racial tension and violence erupted repeatedly between Anglos and Californios. Californios of all classes were unjustly treated. Mexican/Americans were seen as ‘dregs of society’ and white supremacy violence was directed at innocent Mexicans. To avoid violence, Mexican/Americans limited their contact with Anglos. Californios often voted as a block to defeat anti-Mexican candidates. Anglos responded by gerrymandering the Mexican communities to the point that Californios lost all influence. The last Mexican candidates in 1880 withdrew under duress. Mexican delegates were kicked out of the State Democratic Convention and treated with contempt. A few Rancheros who managed to hold onto land called themselves ‘Spanish’ to try to separate themselves from ‘Mexicans’.

V After The Gold Rush: Californios And The Formation Of California Government

In spite of his mistreatment during the Bear Flag incidents, Vallejo remained a staunch supporter of American democracy and did everything he could to help form the new government. The first two capitals were on his land, at Benecia and Vallejo. He served in the first California State Senate and worked on seven committees.

He promoted an act for the protection of Indians and voted to postpone a bill to keep free Negroes from entering California. (While it’s true that the Indian Act offered no help to Indians, it is also true that Vallejo carried on a genuine friendship with neighboring Indian chiefs, especially his closest friend, Chief Solano.)

He wrote a report on the derivation of California place names to make sure the old Spanish names were not replaced. He was asked to run for Lieutenant Gov. and would have been elected, but he had to leave politics to try to prevent his small remaining land holdings from disappearing.

When squatters claimed his land and he tried to get it back through the US Court system, the court costs drained his money and he was forced to sell much of the land he was fighting to hold onto. Finally, the Supreme Court overturned many lower court decisions and denied Vallejo ownership of his lands on questionable grounds with no precedent. His son-in-law lobbied for a preemption bill, which passed the US Congress in 1863. This enabled Vallejo to keep his land--- provided he paid for it, at a price he could not afford.

Having lost his vast rancho holdings and house in Sonoma, Vallejo moved to a hilltop house near Sonoma and lived modestly. He did jobs that servants had once done for him: mending fences, hauling wood, fixing holes in the roof. He got up at 5 AM to turn on machinery that piped water from his hillside spring to the town of Sonoma. This water works was his main income for the rest of his life. When his Sonoma house was taken from him, he arranged that it be turned into a public school for the children of the town.

Vallejo survived with immense dignity as a native Californian who insisted that the state's Mexican past was a rich legacy that deserved to be honored.

VI 1850-1900: Changes And Adaptations For Mexican/Americans

1. **Formation of barrios** - segregated neighborhoods socially, geographically, and politically separated from larger settlements.

Barrios started in the 1850s in Northern California, in the 1870s in Southern California. Only a small number of the once wealthy Spanish-speaking elite escaped segregation by becoming assimilated into Anglo society through marriage. Outside barrios, the general population was hostile to Mexican/Americans.

But barrios were also a haven for traditional customs. Barrios ensured the persistence of Mexican culture in California: Spanish language, religious practices, cultural and social activities, and family ties. Examples are barbeques, fandangos, and horsemanship contests. Religion helped sustain the Californios through faith and the many patron saints' celebrations. Mutual aid societies provided life insurance, loans, and medical insurance. More than 2 dozen Spanish language newspapers appeared in California between 1870-1910. Newspapers expressed pride, encouraged minority views, and denounced discrimination by Anglos. Though a majority of Mexicans could not read, those who did passed on the content of the papers. Ethnic pride contributed to the persistence of Mexican society.

2. **Changes in occupations** - by 1890, the pattern stabilized and persisted until 1930; Mexican Californians were confined to menial unskilled jobs, living close to poverty and bare subsistence.
 - Loss of cattle trade and related jobs.
 - Cheap labor force for new jobs: farm workers, cannery workers, teamsters, gardeners, seasonal migrant farm laborers, etc.
 - Loss of other cheap laborers: declining Indian population; Chinese excluded everywhere but SF
 - Hispanic California workers were locked into an occupational structure that restricted opportunities for advancement and perpetuated their poverty. They were indispensable to building California's economic prosperity but did not benefit financially.
3. **Changes in familial roles and power.** Women (and children as young as 6 years) were forced to join men in the workplace, which most likely had impacts on family relationships and power sharing (there are no sociological studies of this issue from this era). Men often had to leave the rest of the family behind as they went off to seasonal jobs far from home. Men were often killed in dangerous work. 31% of Mexican families were headed

permanently by women in the 1880's; while countless more were headed by women on a seasonal basis.

VII Lasting Contributions Of 19th Century Californios

1. **Location and names of cities.** Also names of geographic entities such as rivers and valleys
2. **Agricultural production**

Many early crops and agricultural innovations stemmed from mission or rancho agricultural practice and experimentation. California crops introduced by Mexicans include wine, olives, and oranges. Mexicans were the first to grow cotton in California, and nearly every kind of grain. Vallejo was the first commercial wine grower; and his direct descendants include Charles Krug, a famous wine producer. Vallejo also made contributions to the technology of viticulture.

- Horticultural contributions include palm trees, many species of flowers
- Introduction of animal husbandry, including: honey bees, cattle, Spanish horses

3. **“Roman law” traditions brought by Californios.** The Yankees brought “English,” or case, law)

Especially noticeable in municipal law, Californios contributions are seen in California laws related to community property, separate property rights of a wife, domestic relations, descents and distribution, trespass, and proceedings in action

4. **Religious and ethnic diversity**

5. **Sense of identity and legacy: Anglo Californians ‘adopt’ Mexican heritage**

The Mexican period contributed more to California ‘heritage’ than anything the Yankees or foreigners brought with them in the Gold Rush or its aftermath. Sensing profit, Yankees began to celebrate and exploit the ‘glorious’ Rancho and Mission era they had recently vilified and exterminated.

- Tourism: the first tourist push in California was to the Los Angeles area in the 1870's, and focused entirely on the ‘romance of missions and rancho days’. The first tourist advertisements aimed to make brand-new train systems profitable by luring passengers. Later tourist promotion aimed to lure developers and commercial interests to settle in California and enrich the state.
- Yankees suddenly ‘discovered’ that the dons were romantic heroes, the same dons they had stereotyped as lazy, irresponsible men only a few years earlier.

Ramona, an 1884 novel by Helen Hunt, based on a romantic view of the rancho era, was an expose of the greed and corruption of Yankees who destroyed both the Indian and Mexican cultures. Ironically, this novel was exploited by Yankees for tourist purposes. Tours of “Ramona’s California”, pointing out fictitious places such as “Ramona’s house” were popular and lucrative. Older Mexican Californians and the few remaining Mission Indians were exploited for public ‘reenactments’ on ‘historic celebration’ days. All of this was good for tourist promoters, but did nothing for Mexican Americans except to denigrate them once again, as ‘remnants’ of a bygone era.

6. American Cowboy traditions invented by Rancheros

- Spanish horse breeds introduced as prized breeds
- Horsemanship, competition based on horse skills and tricks

Terms:

- **Ramada**, Sp. patio or outdoor roof-trellis (sometimes with vines trained on it)
- **Remuda**, Sp. ‘exchange’ (group of cattle horses from which cowboy can choose a new, or ‘exchange’ horse)
- **Rodeo**: Sp. ‘round-up’, from process of gathering wild herds by circling around them; later used for circle-pattern of many rodeo races and tricks, such as barrel racing in a ring
- **chaps**: Sp. Chaparreras, chaparral, landscape dominated by dense thickets of evergreen shrubs and small trees, such as in foothills of California—hot, dry in summer and cool, moist in winter
- **lasso**: Sp. Lazo, from Latin word for noose
- **lariat**: Sp. La reata, the tie (rope)
- **buckaroo** Sp. vaquero (cowboy) [but verb ‘buck’ is from Old English word for deer or goat]
- **bronco**—Sp. ‘wild’, meaning wild, bucking horse

7. Heroes

The great American historian, Bernard de Voto called Vallejo “the most considerable citizen in California”. His attributes: he treated Indians with more respect than most men of his era; he was learned and self-educated (with 12,000 books in his home library). Vallejo was articulate, far-seeing, and reasonable, and focused on creating cultural and education institutions for California. He wrote the first comprehensive history of California, and solicited memoirs and accounts from many other early Californios to help the historian, H.H. Bancroft, build his California library and archives. He was a statesman and law maker without ambition for fame or glory, willing to lose money through his efforts at forming a government. He kept faith in constitutional democracy even after it had been misapplied by the US Govt to deprive him of his land, wealth, and position.

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Other examples of Californios heroes:

- Romualda Pacheco was a California governor, US congressman, and US minister to Guatemala and Honduras.
- Jose Abrego was Mission Commisario, Mexican customs officer, Alcade (mayor) of Monterey, Treasurer of Territorial Finance, and when California became a State, a member of the California Assembly. Both men maintained large ranchos while serving in public office.

8. Food

Mexicans in the Gold Rush brought more appropriate food to the primitive mining ‘camps’ than Euro or Yankee immigrants; a tortilla can be cooked in seconds on a hot rock, while sourdough bread requires considerable time and an oven. Ironically, early settlers scorned Mexican food. Now Mexican food is the most popular ‘ethnic food’ in California, Texas, and many other regions of the US.

9. Mission architecture

Nineteenth century Mexican/American building design, as well as some construction practices, became widespread in California during the “mission revival” period in architecture. The Mission revival started in the 1880’s, corresponding to the “romantic Mexican history” tourist craze.

The impact of the mission style remains strong today and is perhaps the only authentic California contribution to architecture. “Mission” style furniture is also very popular, often merged with elements of Craftsman furniture. (The “Craftsman” style dates from same era, late 1880s until 1920s, and also emphasizes simple lines and use of natural materials.)

The influence of Rancho houses, used in both towns and on ranchos, is found in ‘bungalow’ houses and ‘ranch’ houses that became popular in the 1950’s and are common throughout the US. Essentially, bungalow and ranch houses are one story homes with a kitchen eating area replacing the formal dining area of earlier, larger houses.

Elements of mission architecture:

- **Exterior of houses:** Stucco or shingled walls, covered front porches tucked under a low-pitched roof, wide projecting eaves with exposed support beams, and tapered, square columns. Mission style merged with the ‘Arts and Crafts’ or Craftsman, style when it came to America. The focus of Mission architecture is on ennobling modest homes of the middle class, not building country manors for the wealthy.
- **Interior of houses:** Handcrafted natural woodwork visible in built-in cupboards or shelves, simplified columns, Romanesque arches. Inside walls stucco/plaster.

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- **Furniture:** Often in oak, with straight legs and backs, flat surfaces, heavy and solid, little or no decoration. Mission furniture is similar to craftsman furniture but usually simpler.
- **Exterior of commercial buildings:** Long arcaded corridors, sometimes on two stories, (initially to protect stucco walls from rain, and to cool the interiors), Romanesque arches, curved gables, red tile roofs, second story balconies, towers for bells or just for decoration. The thermally efficient construction of brick, stone and mortar in mission architecture keeps the building cooler in day, warmer at night. Massive walls have broad, unadorned surfaces.

Note: the columned arcade not only stems from Moorish/Spanish antecedents, but also from Pre-Columbian buildings. For example, a columned arcade was part of a public building now called Chetro Ketl, a pueblo ruin in Chaco Canyon National Historic Park in New Mexico. This arcade was influenced by Aztec buildings witnessed by Chaco traders. Chetro Ketl was built between 850-1250 CE, centuries before the first arrival of Spanish explorers in the Americas.