

NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

MAYO HAYES O'DONNEL
COLLECTION

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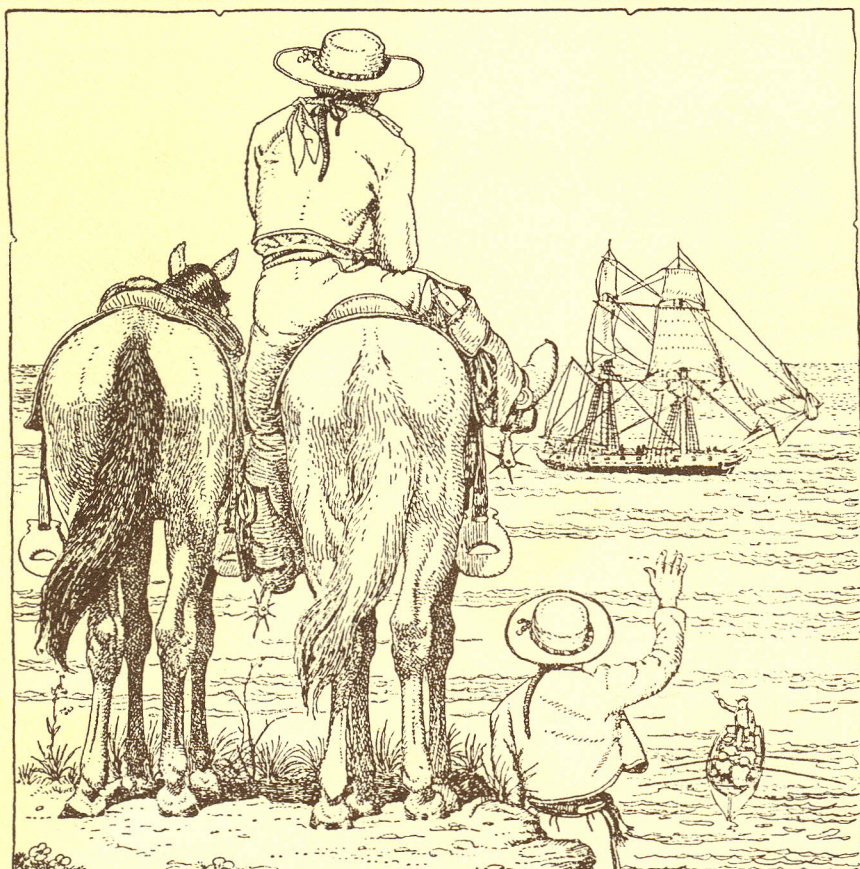
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Rancheros signal a "Boston brig" - from "Californios", written and illustrated by Jo Mora, Doubleday & Company, 1949.

INSIDE: The Fading of Arcadia

The Fading of Arcadia

BY VIRGINIA STONE

March 10, 1776. A cold rain was falling in the late afternoon when a weary procession of riders, foot-soldiers, and Indians moved slowly toward San Carlos Cathedral. A few soldiers stopped to watch the arrival of the Mexican colonists who had left the Presidio of San Miguel, Sonora, on St. Michael's Day, September 29, the year before. After nearly six months, and 1600 miles, they had finally reached Monterey. They had lost only one of their group, a young mother who died in childbirth the first night out. Of the 240 persons led by the redoubtable Captain Juan Bautista de Anza, some would elect to stay in Monterey, while others would forge on to the newly established *pueblos* of San Jose and San Francisco.

Before this epic overland journey, there had been few colonists hardy enough to brave the travails of the wilderness in Alta California. True, a few bedraggled soldiers stationed at the Presidio had settled down and married Indian women. ⁽¹⁾

The success of the De Anza expedition led to a continuing trickle of men and women who came to make their homes in the little red-roofed town of Monterey, the capital of Alta California. Before long, local society began its inevitable stratification, and by the end of what some would call its Romantic Period in 1810, everyday living had moved from its primitive beginnings to one of comparative comfort, certainly for the *gente de razon*, or literally people of reason. ⁽²⁾

One of the more charming figures of the period, Governor Diego Borica (1794-1800) once wrote:

This is a great country; climate healthful, between cold and temperate; good bread, excellent meat, tolerable fish; and *bon humeur* which is worth all the rest. Plenty to eat, but the most astounding is the general fecundity, both of rationals and irrationals. ⁽³⁾ The climate is so good that we are all getting to look like Englishmen. This is the most peaceful and quiet country in the world; one lives better here than in the most cultured court of Europe. ⁽⁴⁾

Governor Borica entertained Captain Vancouver as well as other Spanish notables during his administration in Monterey. He wrote on another occasion:

To live much, and without care, come to Monterey. ⁽⁵⁾

Almost fifty years later, the American government would accept his invitation.

According to Leonard Pitt, who wrote a fascinating book called "The Decline of the Californios" (1966), there are two distinct schools of thought regarding what some came to call the golden age in Alta California. One believes that the days of easy and carefree living ended with the overthrow of the Spanish government and the arrival of the Mexican governor, José Maria Echeandia, in 1826. Before long the consequent secularization of the mission system would mean its ruin as a quarreling band of opportunists fought over the vast land-holdings

that formerly belonged to the church, and the Indians, destitute and hungry, would be forced out on their own, ill-equipped to deal with the new order.

The second school of thought regarding Alta California's golden age believes the Mexican era, which ended with the American presence in 1846, was the true Arcadia.⁽⁶⁾ According to Pitt, Californian society, which had been essentially medieval and clerical until the Mexican flag was raised, now breathed the heady air of *liberalismo*. Young Mariano Vallejo, his nephew, Juan Alvarado, and cousin, José Castro, rebelled against the old order, shocking their elders, most of whom still toasted the King of Spain and the Pope of Rome.

This revolutionary trio of young men, led by twenty-three year-old Mariano, began the study of books which espoused the philosophy promulgated by the visionary leaders of the revolution which was sweeping Mexico, as well as Central and South America.

Mariano was betrayed by his young sweetheart who reported the nefarious deeds of the young men to their priest. Ordered to surrender their books, confess, and do penance, the trio refused to obey and were promptly excommunicated.

Although democracy, as practiced in the fledgling United States of America, was unknown, still the stirrings of that heady tonic were spreading world-wide, both in Europe, culminating in the Revolution of 1848, and in the many Spanish-speaking possessions, already freed from Spanish dominion.

The Californians had little idea of events or conditions in the world outside. The United States was habitually referred to as 'Boston', since the American vessels were almost invariably 'Boston ships'. In the arts of conversation, dancing, and the playing of simple musical instruments, they were indeed accomplished. These things they drank in with their mother's milk as part of their heritage from Spain.⁽⁷⁾

And what did the men from 'Boston' think of these new Arcadians? Their way of life aroused ambivalent feelings in those who came to trade or to stay in Alta California. The visitors might condemn the life style they saw around them, and yet a wistful note of envy crept into their commentary.

Certainly a lack of universal education was considered a grave fault by those who came to visit or to stay. Most of the women and many of the men were illiterate, and yet Bancroft wrote of two boys' schools in existence in Monterey, and there is a mention of a girls' school as well. Mariano Vallejo and his nephew and cousin were reading books considered dangerously liberal by their elders.

Besides a cavalier attitude toward education, the Californios were faulted for their judicial system, admittedly based on European models and not the vaunted constitutional law familiar to Americans with its emphasis on the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers as well as its codified insistence on man's rights before the law.

The lack of trained lawyers was not only a problem in Alta California, but in Mexico as well. As late as 1845, there was not a single judge who had been trained as a lawyer in all the province. Interestingly enough,



From "Californios", written and illustrated by Jo Mora, Doubleday & Company, 1949.

many of the judges and/or *alcaldes* were foreign; David Spence, John Gilroy, and George Allen, although naturalized Mexican citizens, served during the years of 1835-1846. These positions were extremely important in the governance of the *pueblos*. One need only think of Walter Colton, appointed by Commodore John D. Sloat in 1846, to see that his office, a carry-over from Mexican authority, combined legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

Anglo-American expatriates deeply resented the lack of the three features basic to the legal system familiar to them: prompt bail, a jury trial with confrontation by the accusers, and the aforementioned constitutional separation of powers. Justice was slow and uncertain. ⁽⁸⁾

In the exercise of law in Alta California, the importance of building consensus was a major factor. The population was so small that everyone knew everyone else, and thus reputation became a prime factor in judgment.

Civil litigation was particularly interesting. The defendant was called to a conciliatory hearing after the presentation of an oral complaint by

the aggrieved party. Both the accused and his accuser brought with them an *hombre bueno*, that is, a "good man". Their key role was to assess the allegations and recommend a just settlement to the alcalde or judge. Often the disputants were ordered from the chamber, and the alcalde and the "good men" thrashed out the details to a satisfactory conclusion. The alcalde had eight days to work out a decision, but usually the matter was concluded then and there. Evidence suggests the decisions were acceptable in 90% of the cases. Few could dispute the law's delay in this type of litigation.

Besides the lack of emphasis on education, and an ill-defined legal system, many of the "Bostons" decried the fact that the Californios had not been raised to the standards of the Protestant work ethic. The pursuit of pleasure at the cost of business was simply not understood by the visitors.

Their mode of dress was a case in point. The colorful costumes of the local people were described with a sense of wonder by those more familiar with the sober apparel of New England. Charles Henry Dana wrote in 1835:

The officers were dressed in the costume which we found prevailed through the country - broad-brimmed hat, usually of a black or dark brown colour, with a gilt or figured band around the crown, and lined under the rim with silk; a short jacket of silk or figured calico (the European skirted body-coat is never worn); the shirt open at the neck; rich waistcoat, if any; pantaloons, open at the sides below the knees, laced with gilt, usually of velveteen or broadcloth; or else short breeches and white stockings. They wear the deerskin shoe, which is of a dark brown colour, and (being made by Indians) usually a good deal ornamented. They have no suspenders, but always wear a sash around the waist, which is generally red, and varying in quality with the means of the wearer. ⁽⁹⁾ Add to this the never-failing poncho, or the serape, and you have the dress of the Californian. The *gente de razon*, or better sort of people wear cloaks of black or dark blue broadcloth with as much velvet and trimmings as may be; and from this they go down to the blanket of the Indian. ⁽¹⁰⁾

Dana describes the women's dress as follows:

The women wore gowns of various texture - silks, crape, (sic) calicoes, etc. - made after the European style, except that the sleeves were short, leaving the arm bare, and that they were loose about the waist, corsets not being in use. They wore shoes of kid or satin, sashes or belts of bright colours, and almost always a necklace and earrings ... They wear their hair (which is almost invariably black, or a very dark brown) long in their necks, sometimes loose, and sometimes in long braids; though the married women often do it up on a high comb. ⁽¹¹⁾

Dana also wrote about the number of English and Americans who had married Californios, joined the Catholic church, and acquired considerable property. "Having more industry, frugality, and enterprise than the natives, they soon get nearly all the trade in to their hands." He added with a slight sniff of condescension that the alcaldes in Monterey and Santa Barbara were Yankees by birth. ⁽¹²⁾

According to Pitt:

The Californios exemplified the tendency of Latin Americans to



From "Californios", written and illustrated by Jo Mora, Doubleday & Company, 1949.

make pleasure the chief end of work. Most of their enjoyments were formalized and communal. Saint's days and other religious holidays took a great deal of advance planning, but in most communities few days passed without either a spontaneous *baile* (dance), a fandango, an evening of singing and guitar playing, a cockfight, a round of bull-fighting and bear-baiting or a horse race as part of the daily routine. On these occasions the celebrants consumed heroic amounts of food and drink, clearly indulging in conspicuous consumption. As to 'recreations', the Californio's attitude could not possibly have been

more opposite to that of the Americanos. ⁽¹³⁾

In Walter Colton's diary, the essence of the Californio's *joie de vivre* is captured in this entry:

Saturday, Sept. 19 [1846]

I encountered today a company of Californians on horseback, bound to a picnic; each with his lady love on the saddle before him. He, in duty bound, rides behind, throws his feet forward into the stirrups, his left hand holds the reins, his right encircles and sustains her, and there she rides safe as a robin in its nest; sprigs of evergreen, with wild flowers, wave in her little hat, and larger clusters in his; both are gaily attired, and smiles of light and love kindle in their dark and expressive eyes. Away they gallop over hill and valley, waking the wild echoes of the wood. One of my dogs glanced at them for a while, and seemed so tickled, he had to plunge into the bushes to get rid of his mirth. ⁽¹⁴⁾

After all, it was a Saturday.

Colton writes as well of the music that was so much a part of the life of the Californios. Two young men were arrested for robbing a United States courier on his way from Monterey to San Francisco with public dispatches. They asked Colton to allow them their guitars while they were in jail.

Their request was complied with; and last evening when the streets were still, and the soft moonlight melted through the grates of their prison, their music streamed out upon the quiet air with wonderful sweetness and power. Their voices were in rich harmony with their instruments, and their melodies had a wild and melancholy tone. They were singing, for ought they knew, their own requiem. ⁽¹⁵⁾

In the decade prior to the American conquest of 1846, everyday life for the Californios may have had its pleasures, but political affairs were in turmoil. The central government in Mexico had an awkward habit of exiling its undesirables, ex-convicts, and knaves of all descriptions, to the "Siberia" of its most northerly province. The settlers, by now many of them second or even third generation, were highly indignant at the infliction of these *cholos* or scoundrels into their otherwise peaceful communities. Brawling, drunkenness, and lewd behavior made these emigres despised. The native-born were no longer Espanoles or Mexicanos, but Californios, and they were outraged by the behavior of these "foreigners."

However, there were increasing signs of separation within Alta California itself. Resentment grew between the *abejeños* (southerners) and the *arribeños* (northerners) especially after the capital was moved from Monterey to Los Angeles in 1835. Alvarado and Castro in Monterey fomented civil unrest and actually led incursions into the south in a series of comic-opera forays.

Secularization continued apace especially under the administration of Governor Alvarado. It was estimated that by 1845 the original herds of 150,000 cattle belonging to the missions had been decimated by two-thirds. The Indians, now dislocated from the protection of the padres, often had nowhere to go, and died of disease, poverty, and violence. By now, the mission lands were under the control of a favored few, some owning tens of thousands of acres.

What would be the fate of the Californios spread so thinly in this

gracious land? With all their attractive qualities, they were strikingly ill-equipped to deal with the hordes of gringos beyond the Sierra Nevada, land-hungry and eager to carry the continental dream from sea to sea. For them, the Mexican American War became the key to unlock the riches of the Golden State.

Thomas O. Larkin had ideas on the subject. As U.S. consul in Monterey, he envisioned an independent republic managed by the Californios and other emigres. However, this new republic would be under the direct protection of the American military so that Britain and France would not attempt annexation. Meanwhile, the Mexican government left its wayward province more and more to its own devices.

Abandonment by the central government left the Californios in an awkward position. However, when war actually broke out in 1846 many, including Larkin, were surprised to find that the Californios remained loyal to Mexico, at least long enough to defend their honor and win the only major battle of the war at San Pascual.

At first, most Californios were pleased with the fair-minded military government of the United States, but with the discovery of gold and the manic rush of Americans to the newly-won territory, everything would change.

At this point, most of the Californios returned home trying to carry on in the old accustomed ways. Unfortunately, men, like Alvarado, refused the offer of becoming interim governor or secretary of state, and thus lost a chance of an active voice in political affairs.

When the constitutional convention met at Colton Hall in 1849, eight of the forty-eight delegates were Californios, a surprising proportion, considering the fact that they represented only 13,000 people out of a total population of 100,000. ⁽¹⁶⁾

They made an impressive sight as they came into the meeting room, dressed in their colorful costumes. Mariano Vallejo, José A. Carrillo, Pablo de la Guerra, and José M. Covarrubias were experienced and accomplished men, whereas the remaining four, Miguel de Pedrorena, Antonio Pico, Jacinto Rodriguez, and Manuel Dominguez, a mestizo, were eager novices in political affairs.

Many of the gringo delegates were sympathetic to their positions on issues. In fact, a symbolic peace was initiated when Mariano Vallejo walked in with Robert Semple, a former Bear Flag officer, who had been involved in the disgraceful "arrest" of Vallejo in Sonoma. Invocations were delivered by both Catholic and Protestant churchmen.

When the problem of choosing a state seal arose, delegate Vallejo seriously proposed an emblem showing a vaquero lassoing a bear. The chamber rang with laughter at this unconscious jibe at the Bear Flaggers, but rejected the proposal by one vote. Plainly, the majority was unprepared to show quite that much deference to Californios. ⁽¹⁷⁾

They did not always vote as a single faction, but did stand firm on voting rights when it was suggested that only white males should be entitled to suffrage. Would not their own Manuel Dominguez be thus denied? They were divided over the issue of the state's political status. Those living in the south wanted statehood for the northern part of Alta

California while retaining territorial status for themselves, thinking they could better control their vital interests in a thinly settled area where American influence was less dominant.

Taxation was an important issue to all of them. Should land be more heavily taxed than other forms of wealth? They felt they had won an important victory when it was decided assessors would be elected locally, thus being more sensitive to the local population and its needs.

Pitt summarizes the successful conclusion of the convention as follows:

The constitution was the only major document of state the Californios ever helped to shape. Even as guns boomed, however, the locus of power had already shifted away from their capital, Monterey. Northeastward, in the Sierra, in the hurly-burly of the mines, the gringos knew little and cared less about either the army's attempt to spare the Californios undue agony in their transformation, the convention's polite genuflections to the 'Spaniards,' or the efforts of the rancheros to retain influence in the new framework of government. The gringo newcomers, in fact, were beginning to impose on the Californios precisely the kind of absolute defeat the military had found so abhorrent and had tried so hard to forestall.⁽¹⁰⁾

The land, still wild and beautiful, lay at the heart of the problem. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, the Californios were promised their rights would be respected "in the free enjoyment of their liberty and property".⁽¹¹⁾ Who could have foreseen the ever increasing hordes of Americans come to find their fortunes in the mines or on the land? The Californios had so much land, and they had so little!

Thus, when the Land Law of 1851 was passed, the shadows began to fall. Mexican land grants, at best, were often casual and contradictory. "An estimated two hundred California families owned 14 million acres in parcels of from 1 to 11 leagues (nearly 4,500 acres to the league). This, cried the Yankees, was simply "unfair."⁽¹²⁾

Their argument that the land was not being used up to its potential was undeniably valid. Their own heritage had been one where the seemingly limitless availability of land lay always beyond the horizon, and to be denied what they considered their "right" because some foreigners held vague title, was not to be countenanced.

The Land Law set up a three-man commission to sit in San Francisco and hear the arguments for valid title. The Californios faced a number of obstacles. Many did not speak English, many did not have the money or time to travel to San Francisco and/or hire lawyers who would fight for their claims. The claims themselves were vague, e.g. the Lugos' claim to Rancho San Antonio by virtue of "lines ambling indefinitely from a bullock's skull to a fork in a cow path then to a brush hut and on to a sycamore, to end at a hatchet-blazed stump."⁽¹³⁾

While the deliberations of the Land Commission dragged on, the land-hungry became ever more insistent. Not only were squatters more bold, but violence actually flared in a number of areas, and many Californios fled in fear of their lives.

In other instances, the lawyers, themselves, became the enemies robbing their clients of land. In addition, just as some Yanquis "left

their religion at Cape Horn" and married women of the propertied classes during the Mexican era, now some opportunists sought out Californio widows for their property. Men, like Henry Miller, rented grazing land and then gradually, by one means or another, forced out the owners until he and his partner, Charles Lux, controlled fifteen Californio ranches stretching from Oregon to Mexico. Of course, there were the money-lenders such as Monterey's own David Jacks, who eventually came to own more than 40,000 acres of Monterey lands, including a major part of the old *pueblo* itself.

Within a few years then, a dramatic change took place. Instead of a gradual, but inevitable shift in ownership between the old Californio families and the newcomers, the transfer of property occurred with shocking swiftness. Many of the former owners were not only destitute, but bitter at the chicaneries practiced upon them. The phrases of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteeing "free enjoyment of their liberty and property" had a hollow ring.

For a time, carrying on in the tradition of the founding fathers of the constitutional convention in Monterey, many Californios engaged in politics, from the most humble of offices to the more exalted in the state Legislature. However, as their fortunes began to dwindle, so did their interest in the political process that failed to protect them.

Prejudice against the Californios was becoming rampant. Even during the early days of the Gold Rush, most Mexicans had been hounded out of the mining communities. Now, because of many social factors, some of the Californios turned renegade, and the words Mexican' and 'bandit' were irrevocably linked. Wildly exaggerated tales of the ferocity and shamelessness of the bandito gangs terrorized the good citizens of the state. All too often vigilante mobs rendered their own special form of justice at the end of a lynching rope.

The former amusements of the Californios were also coming under the interdiction of Yankui law and custom. Bull fights and bear baiting were outlawed, but so was the less blood-thirsty sport of horse-racing when it was banned in 1860. The fiestas or festivals on holy days were seldom held any more, and even the delightful fandango was only a fading memory.

In 1835 Charles Henry Dana had written:

They [the Californios] sometimes appeared to me to be a people on whom a curse had fallen, and stripped them of everything but their pride, their manners, and their voices. ⁽¹²⁾

In the winter of 1861-62 torrential rains were measured at 50 inches in some areas. Then for three years in a row, there was a drought so severe that the winter grasses never matured, and the cattle were slaughtered just for their hides. The dreaded scourge of small pox fell upon the land in 1863, and the Spanish-speaking communities suffered more than their American neighbors.

Pitt writes:

Before the catastrophe, practically all land parcels worth more than \$10,000 had been in the hands of old families; by 1870, these families held barely one-quarter. A mean and brassy sky thus eventually did in

the south of California what lawyers and squatters had accomplished in the north - the forced break-up of baronial holdings, their transfer to new owners, and rise of a way of life other than ranching.⁽²³⁾

For some, this meant turning to other occupations such as ranchhand, vaquero, and other pursuits tied in to the old life.

Ironically, in the latter decades of the Nineteenth Century, when men such as Hubert Howe Bancroft were writing the history of the state, and Mariano Vallejo was struggling to write his memoirs, a certain romanticism began to cast a golden light over the pre-Conquest days of the Californios. Only a clear-eyed few recognized that the Californios had sown the seeds of their own destruction. By custom and tradition, they espoused a gracious and hedonistic way of living, unwilling or unable to move into the new world of commerce, banking, and agricultural innovation.

When they lost their land, whether by governmental fiat, the greed of their conquerors, or by nature itself, their social stability was gone. As with most conquered peoples, the slow process of assimilation began. A few of the old surnames linger on, if not within the families themselves then as the names of streets: Alvarado, Castro, Vallejo, etc.

Some of the special festivities of Monterey's early settlers are observed, perhaps in slightly different ways. The Merienda, Monterey History and Art's birthday present to the community, the Cascarone Ball, and the Posada all echo the Californio tradition.

In John Steinbeck's "The Red Pony", old Gitano appears and tells Jody that he has "come back" Jody, not understanding what the old man means, runs to get his mother who is working in the kitchen.

His mother smoothed down her dress and went out, and Jody followed her. Gitano had not moved.

"Yes?" Mrs. Tiflin asked. Gitano took off his old black hat and held it with both hands in front of him. He repeated, "I am Gitano, and I have come back."

"Come back? Back where?" Gitano's whole straight body leaned forward a little. His right hand described the circle of the hills, the sloping fields and the mountains, and ended at his hat again. "Back to the rancho. I was born here, and my father, too."

"Here?" she demanded. "This isn't an old place."

"No, there," he said, pointing to the western ridge. "On the other side there, in a house that is gone."

At last she understood. "The old 'dobe that's washed almost away, you mean?"

Jody's mother was silent for a little, and curious homesick thoughts ran through her mind, but quickly she cleared them out. "And what do you want here now, Gitano?"

"I will stay here," he said quietly, "until I die."⁽²⁴⁾

Later, Gitano is seen riding Easter, an old crowbait of a horse, far away on the flanks of the western mountains, the Santa Lucias. Something is seen flashing in the sun and Jody knows it is the "lean and lovely rapier with a golden basket hilt" that Gitano had shown him one day.

Steinbeck's image of the old Californio disappearing into the western mountains where he and the old horse will find death is compelling. He,

and the remaining Californios, had no chance against the westering movement of the young and vigorous people who would take away his land and let his 'dobe wash away in the elements.

FOOTNOTES

1. Culleton, James, "Indians and Pioneers of Old Monterey", p. 92. The first recorded marriage of a Monterey white with an Indian woman documented the story of Catalina, who committed adultery with the soldier, José Joaquín de Espinosa, became pregnant by him, and was made an honest woman after her husband died, in a ceremony performed by Father Serra himself.

2. Harlow, Neal, "California Conquered", note, p. 25. "European Spaniards, Creoles, and people of mixed blood, to differentiate them from the native Indians, as defined by Miguel Costansó in 1794. (Servin 226)." This concept narrowed in future usage to apply to those of the upper classes, mainly Spanish by inheritance.

3. Colton, Walter, as quoted in Dutton edition, p. 32. "The fecundity of the Californians is remarkable, and must be attributed in no small effect to the climate. It is no uncommon sight to find from fourteen to eighteen children at the same table with their mother at their head. There is a lady of some note in Monterey, who is the mother of twenty-two living children. The youngest is at the breast, and must soon, it is said, relinquish his place to a new-comer, who will, in all probability, be allowed only the same brevity of bliss."

4. Chapman, Charles E., "A History of California", p. 408.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Pitt, Leonard, "The Decline of the Californios", p. 14. Pitt quotes Larkin a decade after the conquest when he "confessed a yearning for 'the times prior to July 1846 and all their honest pleasures, and the fleshpots of those days. Halcyon days they were. We shall not see their likes again'."

7. Chapman, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

8. Oliver Larkin often wrote about the exasperations of the legal system in Alta California.

9. Robert Louis Stevenson also wrote about the dress of the Californios. As late as 1879, "In dress they ran to colour and bright sashes. Not even the most Americanized could always resist the temptation to stick a red rose into his hatband. Not even the most Americanized would condescend to wear the vile dress hat of civilization. Spanish was the language of the streets". "The Old Pacific Capital" as quoted in Dutton, pp. 63-64.

10. Dana, Charles Henry, as quoted in Dutton, pp. 11-12.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

13. Pitt, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

14. Colton, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

16. Pitt, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

22. Dana, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

23. Pitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-248.

24. Steinbeck, John, "The Red Pony", pp. 41-42.

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