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Harvesting the Wheat

A very important feature of early California agriculture was the wheat harvest. Wheat was grown more or less at all the missions. In 1849, according to Guadalupe Vallejo, wheat would not grow here. Had he only visited the missions he would have seen beautiful large wheat fields.

Of course at first many mistakes were made by the fathers in their experiments, not only in wheat and corn but also in wine making, in crushing olives for oil, in grafting trees and in creating fine flower and vegetable gardens, we learned by reading "Ranch and Mission Days in Alta California." At most of the missions it took them several years to find out how to grow good grain. At first they planted it on too wet land. At Mission San Jose a tract about a mile square came to be used for wheat. It was fenced in with a ditch dug by the Indians with sharp sticks, and with their hands in the rainy season. It was so deep and wide that cattle and horses never crossed it.

In other places stone and adobe walls, or hedges of prickly pear cactus, were used about the wheat fields. Timber was never considered available for fences, because there were no sawmills then and no roads to the forests so that it was only at great expense and with extreme difficulty that logs were procured for building. They were chopped slowly, with poor tools, to the size wanted. Sometimes low adobe walls were made high and safe by a row of the skulls of Spanish cattle, with the long curving horns attached.

These horns came from the "Matanzas," or slaughter-corral, where there were thousands of them lying in piles, and they could be so used to make strong and effective barriers against man or beast. Set close together and deep, at various angles about the gateways and corral walls, these cattle horns helped to protect the enclosure from horse thieves.

When wheat was sown it was merely "scratched in" with a wooden plow, but the ground was so new and rich that the yield was great. The old Mission San Jose field is now occupied by some of the best farms in the Santa Clara Valley, showing how excellent was the fathers' judgment of good land. The old ditches which fenced it have been plowed in for more than 90 years

by American farmers, but their course in places can still be traced.

A special ceremony was connected with the close of the wheat harvest. The last four sheaves taken from this large field were tied to poles in the form of a cross, and were then brought by the reapers in the "harvest procession" to the church, while the bells were rung and the father, dressed in his robes, carried the cross, accompanied by boys with tapers and censers chanting the Te Deum as they marched forth to meet the sheaves.

This season was also the season for the Indian festival, and one-fifth of the whole number of Indians were sometimes allowed to leave the mission for a certain number of days to gather acorns, dig roots, fish and enjoy a change of occupation. It was a privilege that they seldom, if ever, abused by failing to return and the fact shows how well they were treated at the missions.

Governor Neve proposed sowing wheat in 1776, and none had been sown in California before that time. At the pueblo of San Jose, which was established in 1777, they planted wheat for the use of the presidios, and the first sowing was at the wrong season and failed, but the other half of their seed did better. The fathers at San Diego Mission sowed grain on the bottom lands in the willows the next year, and it was washed away; then they put it on the mesa above the mission, and it died; the third year they found a good piece of land, and it yielded 195 fold.

As soon as the missions had wheat fields they wanted flour, and mortars were made. Some of them were holes cut in a rock, with a heavy pestle lifted by a long pole. Many of these mortar holes may be seen throughout California. We have seen a group of 20 or more near the San Antonio Mission.

When La Perouse, the French navigator, visited Monterey he gave the fathers at Carmel an iron hand mill so that the Indian women could more easily grind their wheat. He also gave the fathers seed potatoes from Chile, the first that were known in California.