Life in California before the Gold Discovery

Guadalupe Vallugo et al.
a meeting ground for Latino and Anglo peoples and cultures. The May 2005 election of Antonio Villaraigosa as mayor of Los Angeles brought comparisons to earlier periods in the history of that city, which had had Latino mayors until 1872.

The following documents are from aging Californios, remembering life before the 1846 "Bear Flag Revolt" and the 1849 gold rush brought tens of thousands of immigrants to California. The first account is by Guadalupe Vallejo, who was the nephew of the general taken prisoner by "the Bears." The subsequent three accounts are by daughters of some of the important Mexican ranching families, many of whom lost land, animals, and social status to the newly arrived Anglo settlers.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How did the changes brought about by the gold rush and by becoming part of the United States affect what these Californios wrote and what they remembered about life in Mexican California?
2. How did these Californios feel about the arrival of Americans?
3. Some time in the late nineteenth century, Californios seem to have disappeared as a group. What might have happened to them?

GUADALUPE VALLEJO

Ranch and Mission Days in Alta California

It seems to me that there never was a more peaceful or happy people on the face of the earth than the Spanish, Mexican, and Indian population of Alta California before the American conquest. We were the pioneers of the Pacific coast, building towns and Missions while General Washington was carrying on the war of the Revolution, and we often talk together of the days when a few hundred large Spanish ranches and Mission tracts occupied the whole country from the Pacific to the San Joaquin. No class of American citizens is more loyal than the Spanish Californians, but we shall always be especially proud of the traditions and memories of the long pastoral age before 1840. Indeed, our social life still tends to keep alive a spirit of love for the simple, homely, outdoor life of our Spanish ancestors on this coast, and we try, as best we may, to honor the founders of our ancient families, and the saints and heroes of our history since the days when Father Junípero planted the cross at Monterey.

The leading features of old Spanish life at the Missions, and on the large ranches of the last century, have been described in many books of travel, and with many contradictions. I shall confine myself to those details and illustrations of the past that no modern writer can possibly obtain except vaguely, from hearsay, since they exist in no manuscript, but only in the memories of a generation that is fast passing away. My mother has told me much, and I am still more indebted to my illustrious uncle, General Vallejo, of Sonoma, many of whose recollections are incorporated in this article.

When I was a child there were fewer than fifty Spanish families in the region about the bay of San Francisco, and these were closely connected by ties of blood or intermarriage. My father and his brother, the late General Vallejo,
saw, and were a part of, the most important events in the history of Spanish California, the revolution and the conquest. My grandfather, Don Ygnacio Vallejo, was equally prominent in his day, in the exploration and settlement of the province. The traditions and records of the family thus cover the entire period of the annals of early California, from San Diego to Sonoma.

What I wish to do is to tell, as plainly and carefully as possible, how the Spanish settlers lived, and what they did in the old days. The story will be partly about the Missions, and partly about the great ranches...

A number of trappers and hunters came into Southern California and settled down in various towns. There was a party of Kentuckians, beaver-trappers, who went along the Gila and Colorado rivers about 1827, and then south into Baja California to the Mission of Santa Catalina. Then they came to San Diego, where the whole country was much excited over their hunter clothes, their rifles, their traps, and the strange stories they told of the deserts, and fierce Indians, and things that no one in California had ever seen. Captain Paty was the oldest man of the party, and he was ill and worn out. All the San Diego people were very kind to the Americans. It is said that the other Missions, such as San Gabriel, sent and desired the privilege of caring for some of them. Captain Paty grew worse, so he sent for one of the fathers and said he wished to become a Catholic, because, he added, it must be a good religion, for it made everybody so good to him. Don Pio Pico and Doña Victoria Domínguez de Estudillo were his sponsors. After Captain Paty's death the Americans went to Los Angeles, where they all married Spanish ladies, were given lands, built houses, planted vineyards, and became important people. Pryor repaired the church silver, and was called "Miguel el Platero." La laughed was always so merry that he was named "Ricardo el Buen Mozo." They all had Spanish names given them besides their own. One of them was a blacksmith, and as iron was very scarce he made pruning shears for the vineyards out of the old beaver traps.

On Christmas night, 1828, a ship was wrecked near Los Angeles, and twenty-eight men escaped. Everybody wanted to care for them, and they were given a great Christmas dinner, and offered money and lands. Some of them staid, and some went to other Missions and towns. One of them who staid was a German, John Gronigen, and he was named "Juan Domingo," or, because he was lame, "Juan Cojo." Another, named Prentice, came from Connecticut, and he was a famous fisherman and otter hunter. After 1828 a good many other Americans came in and settled down quietly to cultivate the soil, and some of them became very rich. They had grants from the governor, just the same as the Spanish people.

It is necessary, for the truth of the account, to mention the evil behavior of many Americans before, as well as after, the conquest. At the Mission San José there is a small creek, and two very large sycamores once grew at the Spanish ford, so that it was called la aliso. A squatter named Fallon, who lived near the

1. Miguel el Platero: Miguel the Silversmith.
2. Ricardo el Buen Mozo: Ricardo the Good Guy.
4. la aliso: The alder.
crossing, cut down these for firewood, though there were many trees in the
canon. The Spanish people begged him to leave them, for the shade and beauty,
but he did not care for that. This was a little thing, but much that happened was
after such pattern, or far worse.

In those times one of the leading American squatters came to my father,
Don J. J. Vallejo, and said: “There is a large piece of your land where the cattle
run loose, and your vaqueros have gone to the gold mines. I will fence the field
for you at my expense if you will give me half.” He liked the idea, and assented,
but when the tract was inclosed the American had it entered as government
land in his own name, and kept all of it. In many similar cases American settlers
in their dealings with the rancheros took advantage of laws which they under-
stood, but which were new to the Spaniards, and so robbed the latter of their
lands. Notes and bonds were considered unnecessary by a Spanish gentleman in
a business transaction, as his word was always sufficient security.

Perhaps the most exasperating feature of the coming-in of the Americans
was owing to the mines, which drew away most of the servants, so that our
cattle were stolen by thousands. Men who are now prosperous farmers and
merchants were guilty of shooting and selling Spanish beef “without looking at
the brand,” as the phrase went. My father had about ten thousand head of cat-
tle, and some he was able to send back into the hills until there were better laws
and officers, but he lost the larger part...

PRUDENCIA HIGUERA

Trading with the Americans

In the autumn of 1840 my father lived near what is now called Pinole Point, in
Contra Costa County, California. I was then about twelve years old, and I re-
member the time because it was then that we saw the first American vessel that
traded along the shores of San Pablo Bay. One afternoon a horseman from the
Peraltas, where Oakland now stands, came to our ranch, and told my father that
a great ship, a ship “with two sticks in the center,” was about to sail from Yerba
Buena into San Pablo and Suisun, to buy 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 that my father had bought
from one of the Vallesios, but as we did not have any barrels, we followed the
common plan in those days. We cast the tallow in round pits about the size of a
cheese, dug in the black adobe and plastered smooth with clay. Before the
melted tallow was poured into the pit an oaken staff was thrust down in the cen-
ter, so that by the two ends of it the heavy cake could be carried more easily. By
working very hard we had a large number of hides and many pounds of tallow
ready on the beach when the ship appeared far out in the bay and cast anchor
near another point two or three miles away. The captain soon came to our

5. vaqueros: Cowboys.
landing with a small boat and two sailors, one of whom was a Frenchman who knew Spanish very well, and who acted as interpreter. The captain looked over the hides, and then asked my father to get into the boat and go to the vessel. Mother was much afraid to let him go, as we all thought the Americans were not to be trusted unless we knew them well. We feared they would carry my father off and keep him a prisoner. Father said, however, that it was all right; he went and put on his best clothes, gay with silver braid, and we all cried, and kissed him good-by, while mother clung about his neck and said we might never see him again. Then the captain told her: "If you are afraid, I will have the sailors take him to the vessel, while I stay here until he comes back. He ought to see all the goods I have, or he will not know what to buy." After a little my mother let him go with the captain, and we stood on the beach to see them off. Mother then came back, and had us all kneel down and pray for father's safe return. Then we felt safe.

He 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 toothbrushes, the first ones I had ever seen. I remember that we children rubbed them on our teeth till the blood came, and then concluded that after all we liked best the bits of pounded willow root that we had used for brushes before. After the captain had carried all the hides and tallow to his ship he came back, very much pleased with his bargain, and gave my father, as a present, a little keg of what he called Boston rum. We put it away for sick people.

After the ship sailed my mother and sisters began to cut out new dresses, which the Indian women sewed. On one of mine mother put some big brass buttons about an inch across, with eagles on them. How proud I was! I used to rub them hard every day to make them shine, using the tooth-brush and some of the pounded egg-shell that my sisters and all the Spanish ladies kept in a box to put on their faces on great occasions.

AMALIA SIBRIAN

*A Spanish Girl's Journey from Monterey to Los Angeles*

Early in the winter of 1829 my father, who had long expected an appointment under the governor, received a letter from Los Angeles saying that his papers were in the hands of the authorities there, and would only be delivered in person. He decided to take my mother and myself with him and go overland, without waiting for the yearly vessel from Yerba Buena which would soon be due at Monterey, where we were staying. It was nearly Christmas when we began the journey. Word was sent ahead by a man on horseback to some of the smaller ranches at which we meant to stop, so that we were expected. A young American who had reached the coast with letters from the city of Mexico heard of our plans, and came to my father to ask if he might travel with us to Los Angeles, which was easily arranged. He did not know a word of Spanish, and I have often laughed at some of his experiences on the road, owing to his ignorance of our ways and speech. At one house the señora gave him some fruit, whereupon he handed her
two reals, which she let fall on the floor in surprise, while the old don, her husband, fell upon his knees and said in Spanish, "Give us no money, no money at all; everything is free in a gentleman's house!" A young lady who was present exclaimed in great scorn, "Los Ingleses pagar por todos!" ("The English pay for everything.") I afterward told the American what they had said, and explained the matter as well as I could, but he thought it a foolish thing that no one, not even servants, would take money for services. We several times met grown people, and heads of families, who had never heard any language except Spanish, and who did not know, in fact, that any other language existed. They were really afraid of our American, and once I was asked if there were any other people like him.

Our route took us up the Salinas Valley and over the mountains to the coast valleys and the Missions. At San Miguel we found everything prepared for a jubilee over the prosperous year. The men walked about and fired off their carbines and home-made fire works, while the padres' servant swung a burning oaken brand in the air, and lighted a few rockets. Inside the church the Indian choir was singing. We saw it all, until about ten o'clock that night; then the alcalde⁶ of the village came with fresh horses, and we went on, as it was very pleasant traveling.

The young American picked up some words in Spanish; he could say "Gracias," "Sí, señor," and a few other phrases. One day we passed a very ugly Indian woman, and he asked me how to ask her how old she was. Out of mischief I whispered, "Yo te amo," which he said at once, and she, poor creature, immediately rose from her seat on the ground and replied, "Gracias, Señor, pero soy indio" ("but I am an Indian"), which gave us sport till long after. The next day our companion gave me a lesson in English by way of revenge. It was the day before Christmas, and we had reached San Buenaventura. It was a holiday for every one. After mass all the men and boys assembled on horseback in front of the church, with the padre and the alcalde at their head. They rode about in circles like a circus, fired guns, beat drums, and shouted. I thought it was very fine, and by signs I asked my American friend how he liked it, and he answered, "Dam-fools!" with such energy that I supposed they were words of praise. Indeed, I used the bad words as very proper English for a year or two, until I learned better, when I was of course much mortified.

When near Los Angeles we had the nearest approach to an adventure of our whole journey. We spent the night at a ranch-house. As I was the young lady of the party, the hostess gave up her own private room to me. At the end of it was an alcove with a window, and in front of the window stood a shrine, with wax figures of the holy Virgin and the child Christ. Before them were vases, and fresh wild-flowers from the hills—the golden poppies, the first blue "baby eyes," and the white "star-flowers," that bloom at Christmas time.

To judge from appearances the only shrine to which our host was devoted was the cockpit, for the courtyard of the adobe was fairly lined with rows of the "blooded birds" so popular at that time with many wealthy rancheros, each one

6. alcalde: Mayor.
7. Yo te amo: I love you.
tied to a stake by his leg, and being trained for the battlefield. The young American, who, like many other foreigners, took up with our bad customs more easily than with our good ones, was greatly delighted when he saw the rows of fighting cocks in the yard. He offered to buy one, but the owner thought them too precious to sell. At last, by signs, he wagered a dollar on the homeliest of the lot. The host, accepting the wager, released his favorite. Instead of fighting, the two birds went through the window into the room I had occupied, and that with such force that there was a crash, and a mixture of feathers, wax saints, and flowers on the floor. Our host turned pale, and rushed in to disentangle his pets, while the American jumped up and down on a porch, shouting, "Bueno! bueno!" The birds were now fighting in earnest, but the host separated them, gave them to a servant, mounted the saddled horse which always stood ready, day or night, and, with a faint "Adios" to me, disappeared. He knew what he was about, as events proved, for the rage of his wife when she saw the broken shrine was something terrible. The moment she came on the scene she cried out, "Where is he?" and going into the inner courtyard she began to release the game-cocks, which hastened to hide in the nearest shelter. The next morning, when we took our departure, the master of the house had not yet returned, and the mistress was endeavoring to restore the shrine.

BRIGIDA BRIONES

A Glimpse of Domestic Life in 1827

The ladies of Monterey in 1827 were rarely seen in the street, except very early in the morning on their way to church. We used to go there attended by our servants, who carried small mats for us to kneel upon, as there were no seats. A tasteful little rug was considered an indispensable part of our belongings, and every young lady embroidered her own. The church floors were cold, hard, and damp, and even the poorer classes managed to use mats of some kind, usually of tule woven by the Indians.

The dress worn in the mornings at church was not very becoming; the rebozo\(^8\) and the petticoat being black, always of cheap stuff, and made up in much the same way. All classes wore the same; the padres told us that we must never forget that all ranks of men and women were equal in the presence of the Creator, and so at the morning service it was the custom to wear no finery whatever. One mass was celebrated before sunrise, for those whose duties compelled them to be at work early; later masses took place every hour of the morning. Every woman in Monterey went daily to church, but the men were content to go once a week.

For home wear and for company we had many expensive dresses, some of silk, or of velvet, others of laces, often of our own making, which were much liked. In some families were imported laces that were very old and valuable. The rivalry between beauties of high rank was as great as it could be in any

8. rebozo: Shawl.
country, and much of it turned upon attire, so that those who had small means often underwent many privations in order to equal the splendor of the rich.

Owing to the unsettled state of affairs for a generation in Mexico and in all the provinces, and the great difficulty of obtaining teachers, most of the girls of the time had scanty educations. Some of my playmates could speak English well, and quite a number knew something of French. One of the gallants of the time said that “dancing, music, religion, and amiability” were the orthodox occupations of the ladies of Alta California. Visitors from other countries have said many charming things about the manners, good health, and comeliness of these ladies, but it is hardly right for any of us to praise ourselves. The ladies of the province were born and educated here; here they lived and died, in complete ignorance of the world outside. We were in many ways like grown-up children.

Our servants were faithful, agreeable, and easy to manage. They often slept on mats on the earthen floor, or, in the summer time, in the courtyards. When they waited on us at meals we often let them hold conversations with us, and laugh without restraint. As we used to say, a good servant knew when to be silent and when to put in his cuchara (or spoon).