
Mexico Ushers in Cowboy Era

After years of agitation, Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. When a messenger brought the astounding news that Spain no longer ruled Santa Barbara, many watched in horror as numerous new laws were imposed. A constitution adopted in 1824 required banishment for all who refused to take an oath of loyalty to Mexico. By 1827, a law had been passed requiring deportation of all who had been born in Spain, were less than 60 years of age, and did not have a Mexican wife.

Although it appeared that these laws would bring significant changes to Santa Barbara's largely Spanish population, many were relieved that these laws were seldom enforced. In most cases, they were evoked only when a Mexican politician needed them to get rid of an opponent.

Mexico was so disorganized that it was able to neither control nor support California. The large number of Mexican governors who failed in their attempts to rule California illustrates this disarray. In the 25 years of Mexican rule, there were 13 different governors. In many cases, the Santa Barbara streets named for them, such as Sola, Victoria, and Figueroa, were their most memorable contributions to California history.

The years of Mexican rule were characterized by the development of large, privately owned ranchos, replete with cowboys. Almost immediately, a society dominated by the Mission and the Presidio was replaced by a social structure dominated by these powerful ranchos.

The Fate of the Chumash

Soon after Mexico gained possession of California, the neighboring war-like Tulares encouraged the Chumash throughout the South Coast to revolt. Plans for this revolt were made, and bows and

arrows were crafted and hidden. The spark that ignited the revolution was the cruel flogging of a neophyte by a soldier at the Santa Ines Mission in February 1824. The Santa Ines neophytes revolted. Although soldiers sent a cry for help to Santa Barbara, by the time soldiers arrived, most of Santa Ines Mission had been burned.

The revolt spread to La Purisima Mission, near today's Lompoc, where tribes, fearful they would be attacked, drove soldiers into the church. After a battle that raged all night, seven Chumash, four soldiers, and one Spanish woman had been shot. Soldiers surrendered in exchange for their safety and left the Chumash in control of La Purisima. Several weeks later, they gave their weapons to the padres and began working in the fields again.

In Santa Barbara, neophytes hid in the Mission tower with bows and arrows. The soldiers quickly took control of the Mission, killing three neophytes. According to legend, soldiers then went back to the Presidio for lunch, taunting them with, "We will be back as soon as we have had our chocolate . . . We will bring a cannon and blow you all sky high."

Fearful, the neophytes decided to take their families and journey inland to join the Tulare tribe. Soldiers, angry when they returned to find that they had left the Mission, destroyed their adobe homes and their crops, food supplies, and animals. They even killed four old Chumash who were travelling from Dos Pueblos and knew nothing of the revolt.

In March, De la Guerra sent 80 soldiers inland to find the runaway neophytes and bring them back. They found them near the city of Maricopa and killed four of them. The rest escaped, and the soldiers returned to Santa Barbara to face an angry and disappointed De la Guerra. By summer, a gentle priest journeyed inland to visit his neophytes. He found them disheartened and ill and talked them into giving up their bows and arrows and returning to the Mission.

Neophytes returned to even worse conditions than they had left. Although many criticize the treatment they received by the Spanish, most agree that their lot was even worse under Mexican

rule. This era is marked by forced labor, whippings, poor food, and inadequate medical treatment. During the years of Mexican rule, a large percentage of the surviving Chumash in Santa Barbara died from malnutrition and disease. Combined with a plummeting birth rate and high infant mortality, the Mexican era marked the low point of the once proud and flourishing Chumash of the Santa Barbara region.

Secularization of the Missions

Under Spanish rule, most of the land was owned and controlled by the church through its missions. To many soldiers and settlers, it appeared that the padres had all the land, resources, and power. They chafed under the apparent unfairness of this inequity.

Mexican rule brought an end to the mission system. In 1833, the Mexican Congress adopted a *Decree of Secularization* that mandated all missions be converted to parish churches and the vast mission resources, except the church itself, be transferred to the government. Throughout California, padres were removed and replaced by curates.

The huge tracts of land comprising the mission ranchos were dispersed. In Santa Barbara, much of this land was offered to Chumash neophytes who successfully occupied and cultivated it for two years. In addition to the land, these neophytes were given one-half of the Mission's grain, cattle, and equipment. Although designed to give them independence, the plan was a complete failure. Some sold their land or were cheated out of it, and most eventually left to work on other ranchos or joined the inland Tulare tribe. Virtually none who remained successfully gained self-sufficiency through the cultivation of this land.

During this transition, much that had been developed under the mission system was destroyed. Before long, the wealthy resources of Santa Barbara Mission lay in ruins: huge herds were running wild and left to starve; cultivated lands reverted to the wild; and much of the equipment was stolen or left to rot.

Huge tracts of Mission land were parceled up and given or sold to soldiers and settlers. Suddenly, Santa Barbara was transformed from a church-dominated culture into a society dominated by affluent rancheros (ranch owners) and the cowboys who worked these ranchos.

Santa Barbara Mission suffered less than other missions. In 1840, the first bishop appointed as the leader of the new Mexican parish church system, **Francisco Garcia Diego**, selected Santa Barbara Mission as his residence. His arrival in 1842 brought much excitement and celebration. As his residence, the Mission was protected from the destruction that plagued many of California's other missions.

Nevertheless, by 1845, when it was clear that Mexico would lose California to the United States, **Pio Pico**, the last Mexican governor, began selling missions to the highest bidders. Again, Santa Barbara Mission was lucky: Americans Daniel Hill and his son-in-law, Richard Den, staunch supporters of the church, bought the Mission and surrounding land from Pio Pico for \$7,500, with hopes of saving it. They allowed the clergy to stay and continue services. By the 1860s, the California Supreme Court had declared this sale illegal and deeded the Santa Barbara Mission, including the church, its garden, and the cemetery, back to the Catholic Church.

The Birth of the Ranchos

The 25 years of political turmoil and uncertainty under Mexican rule changed the face of Santa Barbara forever. Each of the 13 Mexican governors needed allies to quell hostilities and build coalitions. They soon found that giving large tracts of land was an effective way to buy loyalty. Though these land grants were not technically legal until they were approved by the Mexican government, locally these grants were considered binding.

Much of the area that is now Santa Barbara County was divided into 40 large ranchos. Even Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Islands were given as land grants. The only area not parceled into ranchos was the coastal land between Goleta and the Rincon, except for Hope Ranch. These coastal lands were, instead, designated "pueblo lands" belong-

ing to the young towns. Before long, the only land not allocated were the mountain areas too steep for sheep to graze and the windswept Santa Maria Valley.

Ranchos soon became the dominant social, political, and economic force of the region. Presidio officers were given their first choice of these large tracts of land. Next, powerful Santa Barbara citizens were given tracts. Although one had to be a Mexican citizen to acquire land, this was not a deterrent: wealthy Santa Barbara residents simply found a way to acquire Mexican citizenship. Soon citizens were owners of huge tracts of land, and Santa Barbara had become the home of a group of wealthy ranchers, called *rancheros*.

By Mexican law, a rancho could not be larger than 49,000 acres. Many assumed that these tracts would remain large and that a few wealthy men would continue to own most of the land. This assumption was incorrect. Unlike the English Law of Primogeniture that required all land to pass intact to the oldest son, when the rancho owner died, land was divided between his wife and each of their numerous children. Within a few generations, most of these huge ranchos had been divided into relatively small tracts of land.

Although many do not see Santa Barbara's "Mexican Years" as golden ones, others recalled this ranching era with fondness. Characterized by Mexican cowboys, celebrations, and resplendent clothes, it is remembered as a time of fiestas, exuberant high spirits, rodeos, and wealth for those lucky few landowners.

Santa Barbara's golden ranching days did not last long. By the summer of 1846, the United States had declared war on Mexico. This marked the beginning of the end of Santa Barbara's rancho days and the transition from an isolated village to a vibrant American town.

The Yankees

Smuggling continued to flourish during these Mexican years. In hopes of getting rich from California's growing trade, the Mexican government passed a law prohibiting all but Mexican-owned vessels

to trade. While this law was even more severe than the Spanish law requiring exorbitant duties on non-Spanish vessels, it was seldom enforced. Before long, ships from the Eastern seaboard were arriving regularly in Santa Barbara. When these ships, richly stocked with desperately needed manufactured goods, anchored off Santa Barbara's shoreline, even law-abiding citizens flocked to buy. After selling their goods, ship captains were thrilled to refill their holds with Santa Barbara produce and hides.

This lucrative trade brought Americans to Santa Barbara. Although most came to trade and left, many fell in love with Santa Barbara and stayed. Almost overnight, these Yankees became an extremely powerful force in Santa Barbara.

Many of these Yankees stayed because they fell in love with Spanish girls. They wooed and married the daughters of Santa Barbara's leading Spanish citizens. The five daughters of Carrillo became the brides of Americans, while three of the four De la Guerra daughters also married Yankees. Did these wealthy fathers realize that the future of Santa Barbara rested with enterprising, energetic Americans and methodically pair their daughters with these future leaders?

Steeped in tradition and ceremony, many of these weddings were lavish affairs. The wedding of one of De la Guerra's daughters, Ana Maria, to the American, Alfred Robinson, was documented and made famous by Richard Henry Dana's description of it in *Two Years Before the Mast*.

In order to marry, Americans had to convert to Catholicism and gain Mexican citizenship. Mexican citizenship also entitled them to acquire land. As a result, many of these Americans-turned-Mexican soon acquired rich ranchos. Before long, "Yankee Dons," with their lovely, cultured, and wealthy Spanish wives, had become Santa Barbara's leading citizens.

Not all the Americans who came to Santa Barbara and stayed became model citizens. Other waves of immigrants left an entirely different mark on the Santa Barbara region. In addition to the fur

trappers who came by foot from the Rocky Mountains, whalers found wealth in the waters of the Santa Barbara Channel.

Before the discovery of kerosene, whale oil lit lamps throughout the world. When observers realized that Santa Barbara was a perfect location to catch migrating whales, the whaling ships arrived. Many of these whalers came from long distances, often as far as Maine or Rhode Island. They remained in the Santa Barbara Channel for two to three years, until their holds were full of oil, before returning home.

The whalers waited in ships near Point Conception watching for the distinctive blow of whales. As soon as whales were sighted, a crew in a small boat rowed the harpooner toward the whale. If the harpooner was skilled, the whale was harpooned and dove deep to die. A few days later, the dead whale surfaced, and the whalers cut the thick layer of yellow fat (blubber) into chunks.

The chunks were melted into oil in 70-gallon iron kettles on the beach. These kettles were stored at whaling stations such as the large one in Goleta where Ward Memorial Boulevard is today. When oil was discovered in Pennsylvania in 1859, kerosene began to replace whale oil, and whaling declined. The last whaling station in Santa Barbara was closed by 1890.

Like the traders, trappers and whalers were energetic and ambitious. Instead of marrying the daughters of the wealthy and adopting the local culture, they remained quintessentially American. They brought an energy, independence, and directness that shocked the polished and aristocratic Spanish families. They expected the United States to claim the lush, promise-filled land called California and were waiting for Santa Barbara to become an American town.

The End of the Mexican Era

The years of Mexican rule were characterized by such continuous political turmoil in Mexico that Santa Barbara was virtually forgotten. Resentful and restless citizens repeatedly asked the

Yankees who had settled in Santa Barbara why it was taking the United States so long to take possession of California.

Forgotten by Mexico, Santa Barbara was also repeatedly buffeted by disparate California interests. During these years, California was comprised of a long strip of largely independent settlements stretching from San Diego to San Francisco. Each of these settlements had different needs and perspectives. Each village wanted to become California's most important town and was willing to fight for this prize.

Between the strong anti-Mexican sentiments of San Francisco and Monterey and pro-Mexican settlements in Los Angeles and San Diego, Santa Barbara was often caught in the middle. An example of this is the attempt of an ex-convict, **Joaquin Solis**, to gain California's independence from Mexico. In 1829, Solis convinced the soldiers in Monterey, who had not been paid for years, to march south to fight for independence from Mexico. The Governor of California sent troops north from San Diego to meet Solis's soldiers. As both forces approached Santa Barbara, local support wavered between Mexican and anti-Mexican sentiments. By the time these two armies arrived, as many as 30 women had rowed through the surf to seek refuge in a ship anchored offshore while most other Santa Barbara citizens were hiding in the Presidio.

A battle took place three to four miles west of Santa Barbara. After three days of fighting, the only casualty was one horse, and Solis had run out of ammunition and supplies. He retreated north, watching helplessly as his troops deserted and dispersed. He was finally captured in Monterey. Although it was known as the "Battle of Santa Barbara," most view this battle as a comedy of errors and incompetence.

Although Mexico weathered this challenge, it was soon clear that the Mexican dominance would not last long. Local leaders knew that close alignment to the Americans in Santa Barbara was smart.