

THE FRAGMENTED METROPOLIS

LOS ANGELES, 1850-1930

by *Robert M. Fogelson*

Foreword by Robert Fishman

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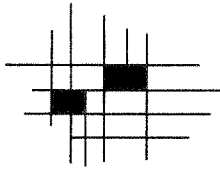
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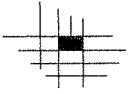
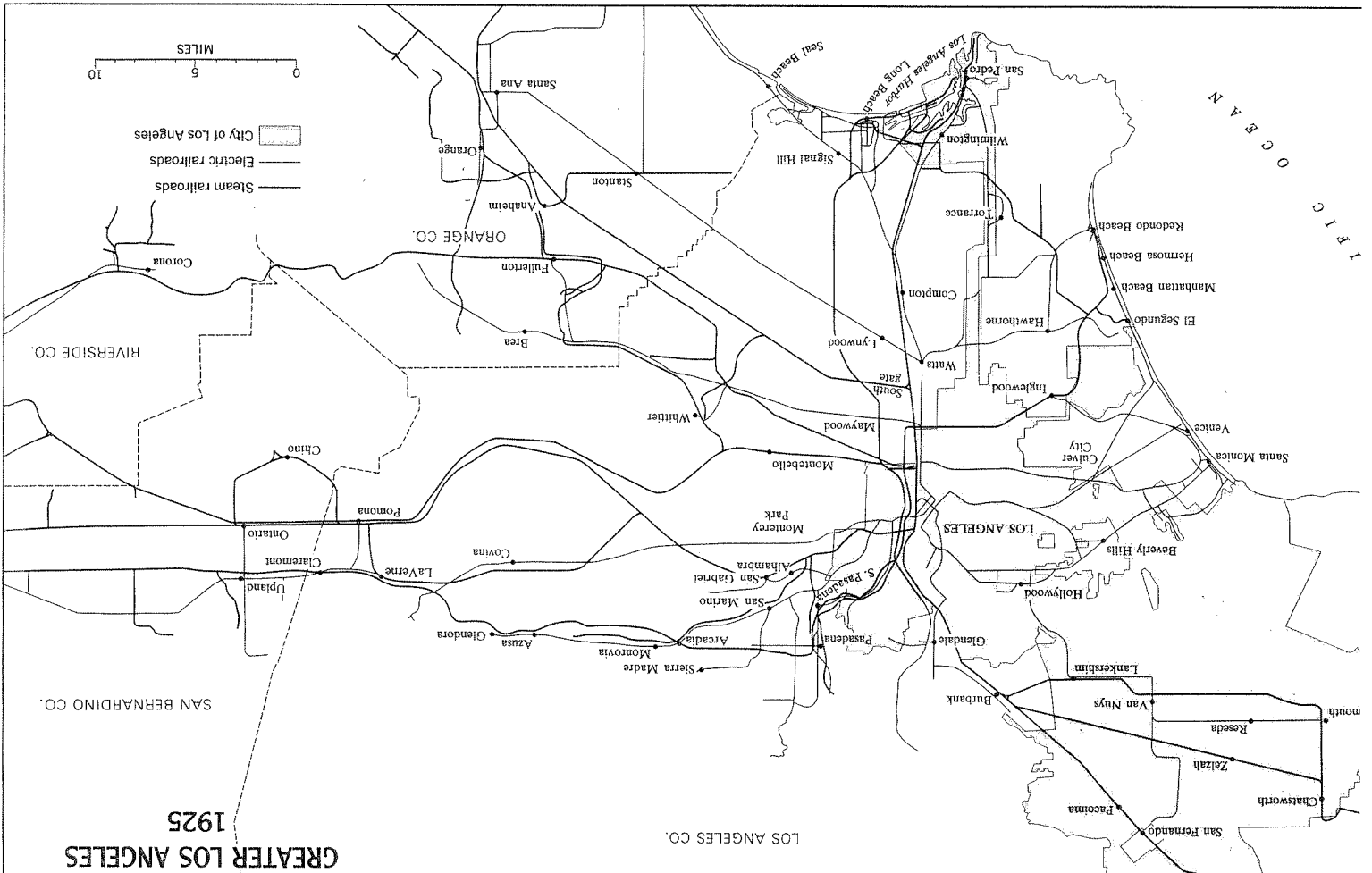
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INTRODUCTION

When California joined the Union in 1850, nothing about Los Angeles foreshadowed its emergence as one of America's foremost metropolises. It was simply a nondescript agricultural village with 1,610 people, no railroads, and few streets or other public improvements. It was isolated, geographically and economically, from the large population centers of the United States and western Europe. And it lacked the natural harbor and surface resources that attracted commerce and generated industry elsewhere in the country. During the next eighty years, nonetheless, Los Angeles underwent perhaps the most extraordinary expansion in American urban history. It grew into a city of 1.2 million and a metropolitan district of 2.3 million persons, by far the largest settlement on the Pacific coast. It built a vast network of railways and highways, tapped northern Sierra sources for its water supply, and subdivided the vast southern California countryside. It also developed into a flourishing commercial entrepôt, an impressive industrial producer, and the economic center of the great Southwest. Indeed, by overcoming its natural handicaps, Los Angeles in 1930 stood fourth in population, second in territory, and ninth in manufacturing among American metropolises.

Los Angeles' character was no less extraordinary. It differed markedly in its landscape, transportation, community, politics, and planning from the great American metropolis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Los Angeles, residences were more widely dispersed, and businesses more extensively decentralized. Electric railways approached bankruptcy faster, and private automobiles handled a greater share of urban transportation. Middle-class native-white Americans were a larger majority, and working-class European immigrants a smaller minority. Reformers dismantled the political

machine more rapidly—only to falter before conservatism, radicalism, and indifference. And city and regional planning were adopted earlier, implemented more thoroughly, and yet undermined more insidiously. More than any other American metropolis—and with remarkably few misgivings—Los Angeles succumbed to the disintegrative, though not altogether undesirable, forces of suburbanization and progressivism. And as a result it emerged by 1930 as the fragmented metropolis par excellence, the archetype, for better or worse, of the contemporary American metropolis.

Thus the history of Los Angeles revolves around two separate but related themes. The first is the emergence of a populous, urbanized, and industrialized settlement—a process which involved the transformation of the Mexican village into an American town, the establishment of a tradition of urban expansion, the triumph of Los Angeles in its rivalry with San Diego, the relentless movement of people to southern California, the provision of transport facilities, domestic water, and subdivided real estate, and the expansion of commercial and industrial enterprise. The second theme is the rejection of the metropolis in favor of its suburbs—a decision which was reflected in the dispersal and decentralization of the landscape, the failure of the electric railway industry, the quest for community by the white majority and the colored minorities, the progressive reform of local politics (including the battle for municipal ownership of public utilities), and the implementation and frustration of city and regional planning. To trace these themes—to define thereby the urbanization of greater Los Angeles—is the purpose of this book.

The quintessence of Los Angeles is the tension between these themes, the ambivalent attitude toward urbanization. Indeed, nothing is more central to Los Angeles' history than the efforts of its residents to join the spirit of the good community with the substance of the great metropolis. This problem was by no means unique to Los Angeles before 1930, though nowhere else was it quite so pressing and poignant. Nor, from the perspective of 1967, was the resolution unusual, though nowhere else did it antedate the Great Depression. Since the Second World War, in fact, most American metropolises have duplicated, to a remarkable degree, the patterns of Los Angeles' landscape, transportation, community, politics, and planning. Hence Los Angeles' efforts to reconcile its conception of the good community with its ambitions as a great metropolis are illuminating not only for what they reveal about Los Angeles' past but also for what they imply about the alternatives available to America's cities in the future.

PART ONE

LOS ANGELES, 1850-1930

As I wandered about Los Angeles, looking for the basic meaning of the place, the fundamental source of its wealth and its economic identity, I found myself quite at sea. The Chamber of Commerce people told me about the concentration of fruit, the shipping, the Western branch factories put up by concerns in the East. But none of these things seemed the cause of a city. They seemed rather the effect, rising from an inexplicable accumulation of people—just as the immense dealings in second-hand automobiles and the great turnover of real estate were an effect. It struck me as an odd thing that here, alone of all the cities in America, there was no plausible answer to the question, "Why did a town spring up here and why has it grown so big?" (Morris Markey, 1932)

Our inheritance is turned to strangers—our houses to aliens. We have drunk our water for money—our wood is sold unto us. Our necks are under persecution—we labor and have no rest. (Juan Bandini, 1855)



1 FROM PUEBLO TO TOWN

Los Angeles, far from being a new settlement, was almost seventy years old when California joined the Union. It was founded in the late eighteenth century when Spain decided to defend its empire and propagate Catholicism by colonizing California. Since the crown lacked the resources and since its subjects showed little interest, the church assumed this responsibility. Its priests, accompanied by government troops and vowing to enhance the glory of God and King, marched north from western Mexico along the Pacific Ocean into coastal California. There they encountered thousands of primitive but peaceful Indians who were intrigued by the mysteries of Christianity and impressed by the devotion of its messengers. The clerics gained the natives' confidence, converted many to Catholicism, and then persuaded or compelled them to leave their tribal villages for sacred communities known as missions.¹ Resistance was ineffective against ecclesiastical determination and military power, and between the 1780's and 1830's the Spaniards resettled the California Indians on missions extending from San Diego north to Point Reyes.

To the aborigines, conversion meant confinement and civilization equaled subjugation. While in theory the missions prepared the natives for eventual independence, in fact the priests retained complete control. As missionaries they instructed the Indians in the gospel, as overseers they supervised their work, and as judges they punished their infractions. They exactingly regimented life and labor on the missions in accord with their church's absolute authority, their estates' material advancement, and their wards' spiritual improvement. For the aborigines, slavery in this world was a prerequisite for salvation in the next. And despite the sincerity of the Spaniards, Christian civilization was disastrous for the Indians. Uprooted from cultures

which had accommodated tribal abilities to environmental conditions, they suffered grievously from the clerics' inflexibility and the soldiers' brutality. Thus not only did the aboriginal population decline from 130,000 to 90,000 between 1770 and 1832,² but, in addition, few Indians survived without irreparable physical and psychological damage that rendered them unfit for independent life.

The missions thrived nonetheless. Endowed with a mild climate and abundant land, California made only modest demands on its sparse and backward population. And the priests possessed adequate knowledge of productive techniques and ample power to force steady work from the Indians. Under clerical supervision, the aborigines planted and harvested cereals and vegetables, pastured and tended cattle and sheep, and then slaughtered and sheared them for meat and wool. They also cut the branches and dug the adobe for their simple huts and the priests' elaborate chapels, and, when finished with their labors, prayed, studied, and slept according to schedules set by the missionaries.³ Although this training was intended to teach the natives to govern themselves and manage the estates, the priests were unwilling to relinquish their authority and property. Conceived of as a temporary means of facilitating colonization, the missions became firmly fixed as California's dominant economic and social institutions in the early nineteenth century.

For the defense of the missions, Spain founded presidios at San Diego, San Francisco, and other sheltered places along the Pacific coast. The presidios were supplied by ship from Mexico, and, to relieve the royal exchequer of this burden, the imperial authorities decided to establish pueblos (agricultural villages) in California. According to Governor Felipe de Neve, the pueblos were supposed to provide the presidios with foodstuffs, wine, and horses, furnish their garrisons with soldiers, and, beyond this, stimulate agriculture, stock raising, and related industries.⁴ As few *gente de razon* (people of reason, or Europeans as opposed to Indians) resided in the province, however, the government was obliged to recruit *pobladores* (colonists) from among the Mexican people. But they displayed so little enthusiasm for the dangerous trip and precarious enterprise that the Governor, following precedents codified in Spain's Laws of the Indies, offered inducements to stimulate interest.

De Neve promised the pobladores a subsidy of money, stock, and tools, a building lot close to the plaza for residence, several tracts of outlying farmland for sustenance, adequate grazing land, and a share in the common water, pasturage, firewood, and lumber. He also ex-

empted them from tithes or any other taxes on their produce for five years. The colonists, in return, were obliged to complete their homes, cultivate their fields, increase their cattle, and construct a dam and other public works. They were also bound to sell their surplus at a fair price to the presidios, and to reimburse the royal treasury for its initial assistance from the profits.⁵ Since the pueblos were supplemental agricultural units, the authorities instructed that they be located at sites close to the presidios and suited for farming, which, in an arid country, meant near available water. Guided by the institution's rationale and the province's environment, the imperial government then designated several places as pueblos.

Among these was *el pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles* (the village of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels) which was founded by Governor de Neve in 1781. Following his instructions to select a site in southern California's coastal plain, the pobladores first located Los Angeles near enough to the Porciuncula River to tap its waters yet high enough above it for protection against winter floods. They then took possession of the land and laid out the pueblo, setting aside a parcel two hundred by three hundred feet for the plaza and fixing its corners at the cardinal points of the compass. They also divided the surrounding territory into *solares* (building lots twenty by thirty varas) and *suertes* (sowing fields two hundred by three hundred varas) and reserved the remaining property for common use and newcomers. Finally, they held a lottery and distributed one solare, two irrigable suertes, and two dry ones to each poblador.⁶ Subsequently, the settlers exploited the village's fertile soil, ample water, and warm weather so effectively that Los Angeles prospered beyond expectations, attracted more colonists, and, with about one thousand inhabitants, ranked first in size among California's settlements in the 1830's.⁷

The missions fared less well. In the 1830's, a decade after Mexico declared its independence of Spain, the republic, in response to claims that the priests were monopolizing the land and exploiting the natives, transferred the missions from the church to the state.⁸ The Mexican authorities then reversed the Spanish policy of granting little property to individuals and even encouraged people to apply for parcels. Although they insisted that the petitioners be Mexican citizens, head their own households, and possess sufficient stock,⁹ these requirements were moderately phrased and liberally interpreted. As a result applicants acquired more than seven hundred concessions for estates ranging from less than a hundred to more than a million acres during the following decade.¹⁰ And by 1846 private proprietors (known as

rancheros) owned nearly all of southern California's arable and pasture land and directed the region's economy and society.

Although the rancheros were less restricted than the missionaries in pursuing their material advantages, they too were severely circumscribed by the province's geography and resources. Thousands of miles of mountains, deserts, and plains separated California from the markets of the eastern United States and the central Mexican plateau, and thousands of miles of ocean isolated it from the ports of the Hawaiian Islands and the Orient. The earth's surface contained no precious metals, and the settlers lacked the capital to support a quest for mineral wealth. The abundant land and limited water discouraged intensive cultivation, and a mild climate and sparse population permitted an indolence impossible in colder and more crowded countries. Nor did the Californians endeavor to overcome these handicaps. Trained as soldiers of Spain and Mexico, they regarded work with distaste and business with contempt, equated improvement with adherence to their ancestors' arts, science, and religion, and measured progress by participation in lengthy visits, ceremonial display, and vigorous exercise. As they accommodated their inclinations to the region's character, the Californians appeared to some visitors as "the least promising colonists of a new country" and to others as "a happy people, possessing the means of physical pleasure to the full."¹¹

The Californians based their economy and society on vast estates known as ranchos. The ranchos were divided into three parts: sprawling haciendas on which the rancheros and their families resided; nearby gardens, vineyards, and fields; and, by far the largest chunk, surrounding pasture for the cattle. The cattle, which were originally established in southern California by the priests and later appropriated from the secularized missions by the rancheros, were the rancho's primary source of wealth. They provided meat, clothing, candles, and ropes, among other essentials. For the rancheros, indeed, stock raising was more than a means of livelihood well suited to the region's environment; it was also a way of life consistent with their own inclinations. Given the mild weather and limited but adequate rainfall, the herds could forage the hills unsupervised; and thus freed from more mundane matters, the rancheros could live—or so they thought—in the style of Spanish grandees.¹²

The Indians, not the Californians, made up the labor force. Although many did not survive the mission experience and others returned to their villages after secularization, a substantial number who were incapable of caring for themselves stayed in the vicinity of the

ranchos. The Californians promptly recruited them, offering, in return for labor and service, plain but ample fare, simple but adequate shelter, and unenlightened but patriarchic guidance. For these benefits the Indians watched the herds and slaughtered the cattle, prepared the meat and cured the hides. They planted the gardens, vineyards, and fields and then cultivated the potatoes, peppers, beans, and peas, tended the grapes, and harvested the corn, wheat, maize, and barley. They dug the adobe and erected the buildings, sawed the lumber, and constructed the furniture.¹³ With their women, who cooked the food, sewed the garments, cleaned the haciendas, and served the Californians, the natives were as indispensable as the cattle to the rancho economy.

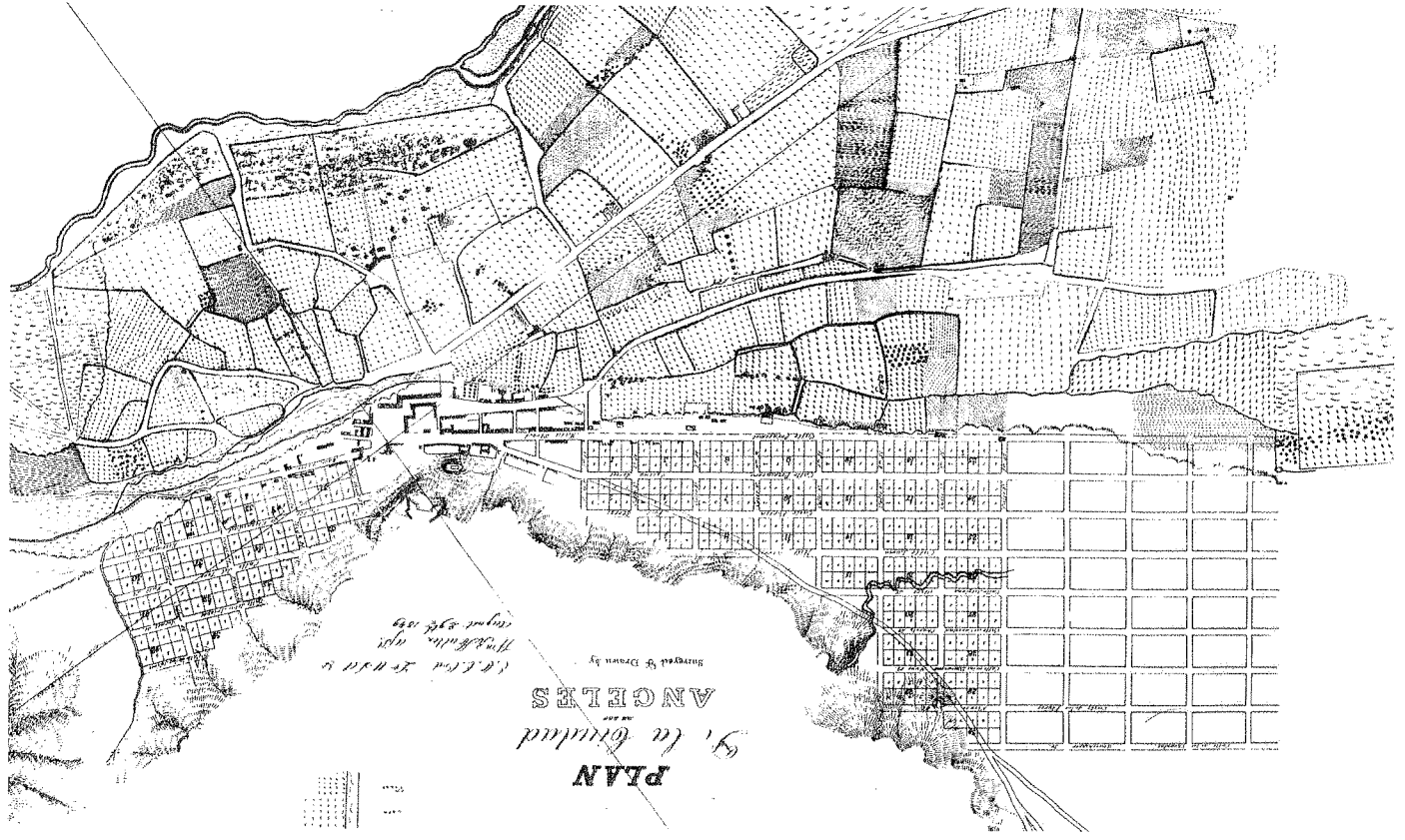
The rancheros geared production to the immediate requirements of their households, and the ranchos achieved a substantial degree of self-sufficiency. Moreover, the herds multiplied so rapidly that the excess hides and tallow were exchanged for goods unavailable in California. American and British merchantmen that plied between the United States, Europe, China, and the Pacific Islands conducted this commerce. Their owners filled them with liquor, tea, and coffee; linen, velvet, and silk; cutlery, crockery, and tinware; and boots, shoes, and jewelry. Their supercargoes then bartered for the hides and tallow which were later sold to shoe and soap manufacturers in Massachusetts.¹⁴ Since the trade was restricted by California's isolation and the market's limitations, however, the ranchos continued to provide all the necessities of life down through the 1840's.

The Californians and the Indians were not only owners and workers; they were also masters and servants. The rancheros, however, did not exploit the natives as intensively as, say, the southern planters did the Negro slaves; nor did they handle them as harshly. After all, the ranchos produced enough for all, and everyone there well knew his place. It was partly because no uncertainties about responsibilities and privileges unsettled the ranchos that one rancho could claim that "We treat our servants rather as friends than as servants."¹⁵ By virtue of this arrangement, the Californians and the Indians shared the same haciendas but not the same adobes, and they ate at the same tables but in assigned seats. Moreover, the natives worshipped and relaxed within the ranchos, and the rancheros prayed in private chapels and socialized on their estates. By thus meeting the emotional as well as the material imperatives of their households, the ranchos attained a social self-sufficiency as nearly complete as their economic autonomy.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles not only retained its position as California's largest settlement, but also increased its population to approximately 1,200 in 1840. The native Californians, a substantial majority, were joined by some Mexicans, pobladores who migrated to the province, and a few Americans, sailors from the Northeast who deserted their ships and pioneers from the Midwest who crossed the continent. But notwithstanding its growth, the pueblo underwent no fundamental changes in its agricultural economy or village society. Few people engaged in crafts, trade, professions, or manufacturing; most natives and newcomers alike cultivated the land or labored for farmers.¹⁶ As they planted additional acreage and established new households, Los Angeles prospered and expanded; it thus developed through the accumulation, not the alteration, of its productive units.

Los Angeles' origins were still visible in its structure in the 1840's because of the pervasive influence of the ranchos in southern California. Their self-sufficiency inhibited opportunities for artisans, merchants, professionals, and manufacturers, and precluded urban growth in the pueblo. "I went to town only occasionally," one prominent ranchero recalled, "and then it was on some urgent business, and I returned without loss of time."¹⁷ Even the American and British supercargoes bargained with the Californians on their estates, stored the hides and tallow in coastal warehouses, and outfitted their ships as shops. They did no business in the pueblo.¹⁸ Thus by 1846 only a basic disruption in the region's economy and society could have altered the pattern of labor and life in Los Angeles, and from the perspective of the Californians nothing in their culture appeared capable of propelling changes of such magnitude.

After all, they had experienced rebellion without change and turbulence without disruption throughout the early nineteenth century. They had witnessed successive factions revolt against authority in the cause of liberty, and settle for new officials in the name of fraternity. They had become convinced that their economy and society, so recently created out of the desert wilderness, was impervious to political upheaval. So, when the United States commenced to wage war on Mexico in 1846, the Californians showed little anxiety as they prepared to defend the province. And indeed, they offered scant resistance. The invaders soon imposed military rule in California, then suppressed a passionate but hopeless insurrection there, and later defeated the Mexican army at Chapultepec. Incapable of protecting its empire, the Mexican government ceded New Mexico and California to the United States for \$15 million.¹⁹



The Californians, who were not consulted by either country, awaited a declaration of policy with trepidation. Previous contacts with the conquerors had dismayed them. "We find ourselves suddenly threatened by hordes of Yankee emigrants, who have already begun to flock into our country, and whose progress we cannot arrest," Pico, a prominent Californian, lamented in 1845. "Already have the wagons of that perfidious people scaled the almost inaccessible summits of the Sierra Nevada, crossed the entire continent, and penetrated the fruitful valley of the Sacramento." "Already are those adventurous land-voyagers spreading themselves far and wide over a country which seems suited to their tastes," he added. "They are cultivating farms, establishing vineyards, erecting mills, sawing up lumber, building workshops, and doing a thousand other things which seem natural to them, but which Californians neglect or despise."²⁰

To relieve this anxiety, the new governor, Richard B. Mason, issued a proclamation from Monterey in August of 1848. "From this new order of things there will result to California a new destiny," he declared. "Instead of revolutions and insurrections, there will be internal tranquility; instead of fickle and vacillating policy, there will be firm and stable government . . . The arts and sciences will flourish, and the labor of the agriculturist, guided by the lamp of learning will stimulate the earth to the most bountiful production. Commerce, freed from the absurd restrictions formerly imposed, will be greatly extended; the choked up channels of trade will be opened, and the poisoned fountains of domestic faction forever dried up." "Americans and Californians," he concluded, "will now be one and the same people, subject to the same laws, and enjoying the same rights and privileges."²¹ As the Governor envisioned an American destiny and American order, however, his assurances challenged the status quo and demanded a flexibility never before required of the Californians. And for that reason the future of the region's economy and society depended on their ability to meet the novel conditions imposed upon them by the Americans.

By effectively exploiting their physical isolation, the Californians had hitherto created a sufficient if not affluent economy. Their ranchos were nevertheless grossly inefficient. Compared with farms in the United States, they produced extremely little per acre and per person. That they survived anyway was due to the sparse population, mild environment, and proliferating stock. That they also prospered was due to the absence of taxes on land and the availability of involuntary labor. During the 1830's and 1840's the provincial authorities met

their administrative expenses with revenues from commercial duties, punitive fines, and forced loans; they levied no taxes on property according to value.²² Throughout the Mexican period, moreover, the number of natives was sufficiently large that the Californians were seldom forced to employ wage earners. Under such conditions the rancheros thrived merely by maintaining their herds, holding their laborers, and avoiding extravagance.

All this changed soon after the cession of California. Although the Americans guaranteed the rancheros legal recognition of their holdings, they did not exempt the estates from assessments levied everywhere in the United States. Since the expenses of the new state exceeded those of the former province, the government followed the traditional practice of raising revenue by taxing property. Unfortunately for southern California, northern California, which was principally a mining center, contained much less assessable land and many more eligible voters. Tempted by the expansive plains owned by a few rancheros, the elected officials levied taxes which fell heavily on the southern ranchos.²³ Assessments on pasture, it is true, rarely exceeded twenty-five cents an acre; but when charged against estates of 10,000 and 20,000 acres, whose proprietors had never before been compelled to market their produce, they were considered by the Californians "burdens which our people are poorly able to bear."²⁴

The Americans also presumed a clarity concerning the ownership of land that was unwarranted in southern California. "There were no surveyors in the country, and fortunately no lawyers," one ranchero explained. "Judges were not professors of law; every transaction was executed in simplicity and good faith; and it should not be considered strange that . . . involuntary errors should have been committed by the grantees or others intrusted with the measurements, boundaries, maps, etc."²⁵ Hence a host of conflicting, and even fraudulent, claims confronted the American Congress. To adjudicate them, it created a Land Commission in 1851 with power to confirm or reject all petitions for Mexican property in California. The rancheros, who assumed that the earlier assurance implied the validity of their titles, now heard with dismay that the Land Commission would demand proof of ownership, and that unless it or, on appeal, the courts upheld their claims, the ranchos would revert to the public domain.

The commissioners reviewed the petitions impartially and ultimately confirmed the titles of most rightful proprietors. But the proceedings were often interminably prolonged, as many rancheros had difficulty finding the documents which authorized the concessions and

locating the boulders, trees, and streams that defined the estates. Appeals from the Commission to the courts further delayed granting of the titles without which the rancheros were unable to manage their holdings properly.²⁶ Also, the Californians, as they protested to Congress, knew so little about American justice that they had to retain attorneys to present their petitions. Law being "proverbially dear," as the most prominent ranchero explained, "the sums that the Claimants are forced to pay for the defense of their titles are often disproportionate to the value of the lands." "The law creating the Land Commission," he argued, "has from the beginning operated as a direct tax upon all private owners of real estate."²⁷

In addition to compelling the Californians to pay litigation fees and property taxes, the transition from Mexican to American rule permanently disrupted the labor force. The Indians, whose population stabilized between 85,000 and 90,000 under the paternalism of the Mexicans,²⁸ were now liberated only to suffer the indifference or hostility of the Americans. The natives "caught the idea that they are free," one sympathetic Californian wrote, but found that "American freedom does not profit them." They were unprepared for hard work, he continued, and "ashamed or afraid to go back to their old *amos* (masters)." Some moved to Los Angeles, where they were rapidly ruined by the vices of the white man, while others, who longed for "the old and kindred associations of their tribes,"²⁹ returned to their mountain villages. There they shared poverty and mourned the dead together.

Some Americans urged the federal government to place the Indians on reservations. Their plea came too late, however, and the Indian population fell from 85,000 to 35,000 between 1852 and 1860. From the viewpoint of the rancheros it mattered little whether the Indians returned to their villages, left for the reservations, or died in Los Angeles. They lost their traditional supply of involuntary labor in any case, and had to employ many free workers for the first time. Under American sovereignty, then, the rancheros were obliged to pay salaries as well as taxes and legal fees. But the limited market for hides and tallow prevented them from meeting these obligations merely by slaughtering more cattle. Since the rancheros had to retain their estates in order to maintain their standard of living and position in society, they were left with no option other than to shift their enterprise from self-sufficient agriculture to market agriculture—from varied production for immediate consumption to specialized production for distant consumers.

After 1848, moreover, the discovery of gold in northern California generated an immense migration which created a mammoth market for cattle.³⁰ Although the southern California rancheros were amazed by the sudden inundation of nearly 100,000 miners from all over the world, they soon realized that the gold rush offered them an extraordinary opportunity to meet their new financial responsibilities. They alone could provide the prospectors with meat. To tap this market, the rancheros drove their herds half the length of the long and uncharted state to the cattle marts of the Sacramento Valley. There the growing population and dwindling supply forced prices to twenty dollars a head for mixed stock and forty-five to seventy dollars a head for prime cattle. With profits handsomely compensating for the treacherous trek, the rancheros shared fully in California's remarkable windfall.³¹

"Everybody in Los Angeles seemed rich," one early settler remembered, "everybody *was* rich, and money was more plentiful at that time, than in any other place of like size, I venture to say, in the world."³² But such wealth spoiled the Californians. "They became too proud and too careless to milk, and so now you find no milk on the ranchos. They could buy clothing and all kinds of supplies, and so their useful and ingenious industries perished. They came to town dressed in absurd gold and silver lace, with gold stirrups and gold-mounted saddles, and wasted their money in gambling-houses; and so their business was neglected."³³ Their desire for goods unattainable to them as self-sufficient rancheros need not have been disastrous. But their infatuation with luxury and pursuit of pleasure distracted them from the fact that their monopoly of the beef trade was temporary. Indeed, it ended once the reports of high prices for cattle in California reached Texas and Missouri and inspired cross-country drives by enterprising southwestern cattlemen.³⁴

At the same time the gold rush passed its peak and the population started to stabilize. Competition between California and southwestern suppliers became intense, and prices plunged to fifteen dollars and even ten dollars a head.³⁵ As southwestern stock was fatter and its meat more tender, few rancheros found purchasers even at these low figures. Rather than accept poor offers, most held on to their herds, "hoping that as the season advances, the prices of cattle will advance." "Vain hope!" commented the *Los Angeles Star*, "as all who have travelled through the mining region know."³⁶ Vain and also costly, for the rancheros still had to pay taxes, fees, and salaries, and, having abandoned self-sufficiency, to buy life's necessities as well. Hence

several sold their land for a fraction of its value, while others saw the sheriff foreclose on their thousand-acre estates for hundred-dollar delinquencies. "Our inheritance is turned to strangers—our houses to aliens," lamented one *ranchero*. "We have drunken our water for money—our wood is sold unto us. Our necks are under persecution—we labor and have no rest."³⁷

Other *rancheros* entered even more deeply into the competitive economy. To meet their obligations, improve their stock, and wait for better prices, they not only borrowed money at excessive interest rates but also mortgaged their estates for collateral. Completely dependent on California's cattle market, the *rancheros* anxiously listened for news of an advance. But the supply of cattle far exceeded the demand, and prices remained extremely low throughout the decade. "The cattle market has never been so depressed in California as this year," an observer wrote to a *ranchero* in 1859; "for the present it is completely glutted."³⁸ By the early 1860's some *rancheros* sought outlets for stock in Chile, and others slaughtered the animals and sold the tallow, hides, horns, and hoofs piecemeal.³⁹ That these parts were worth more than the entire animal was testimony to the appalling plight of the *rancheros*.

Few Californians survived this crisis with their ranchos intact. Trained as soldiers and dedicated to the ideal of the Spanish grandee, they did not understand the complexities of the market economy. Instead of fortifying their position during the boom of the early 1850's, they expanded their holdings and squandered their profits. Now, with the price of cattle depressed and the costs of operation high, they witnessed interest compounded at 2 and 4 per cent per month overwhelm their once independent and flourishing estates. They failed to meet their taxes or payments and read their names on the delinquency lists or forfeited their mortgages. "Some, who at one time had been the richest landowners," a group of *rancheros* wrote to the Congress in 1860, "today find themselves without a foot of ground, living as objects of charity—and right in view of the many leagues of land with many a thousand head of cattle they once called their own."⁴⁰

American *rancheros* and moneylenders purchased these estates at public auctions and private sales. More capable and less sentimental than the Californians, they still faced the same problems as their predecessors. In order to acquire the ranchos, rationalize their organization, and improve their cattle, they too had to borrow heavily from Los Angeles and especially San Francisco capitalists and mortgage their lands as collateral. And in order to meet their obligations, the

Americans, like the Mexicans before them, depended on a rise in the price of beef.⁴¹ Unfortunately for them, the abundance of cattle in California prevented any advances during the late 1850's and early 1860's. It was thus at this point—with the *rancheros* watching the compounding of deferred interest force them closer and closer to bankruptcy—that a series of natural catastrophes precipitated the impending collapse of southern California's rancho economy.

Late in 1861 unusually heavy winter rains flooded the region, damaged much property, and destroyed some stock.⁴² Most *rancheros* remained calm, confident that the smaller herds and richer pasture would revive the lagging cattle market. But the normally dry summer and autumn months passed, and, to the astonishment of the *rancheros*, the weather remained dry in the winter. "We have had no rain as yet," an anxious overseer reported in February 1862; "there is no grass and the cattle are very poor." "The cattle will commence dying within a month,"⁴³ he wrote five weeks later. Although thousands of head perished during the spring and summer, thousands more found sufficient feed in the once-flooded fields. So the *rancheros* waited hopefully, but when another dry year followed they realized that southern California was caught in a prolonged drought. Their herds did not last long: "In passing over the plains," the Los Angeles *Star* observed, "it is sad to see the number of dead cattle; while those that survive present an appearance, such as to produce sympathy for the suffering of the poor dumb animals."⁴⁴

A few *rancheros* unsuccessfully attempted to drive their stock out of the region, and then, in despair, stripped the hides and tallow from carcasses strewn over the land. By the spring of 1864 everyone had lost hope for the future. "We believe the stock interests of the county, as well as the adjoining counties, to be 'played out' entirely," remarked the Los Angeles *Southern News*. "Famine has done its work, and nothing can now save what few cattle remain on the desert California ranches."⁴⁵ The *rancheros* now had no way to meet their outstanding debts and property taxes. Once again the moneylenders foreclosed on the mortgages, and the sheriff sold estates of nearly 10,000 and 20,000 acres for delinquencies of only thirty and sixty dollars.⁴⁶ The inability of the *rancheros* to pay such trifling sums revealed that California's rancho civilization was indeed incompatible with America's competitive economy.

Possession of southern California's ranches passed to a few prominent Los Angeles and San Francisco capitalists. Some chose to utilize their holdings as residential estates and paid for this luxury out of

savings and investments.⁴⁷ But most, whether as individuals or in syndicates, considered the ranches economic enterprises and sought monetary returns. Burdened by substantial expenses and motivated by material considerations, they did not contemplate a reversion to self-sufficiency. From previous experience, they also realized that California's meat market did not justify operating their properties as cattle ranges. The new proprietors therefore decided to engage vigorously in competitive agriculture. And by exploiting the abundant land and mild climate and accommodating production to the distant markets and transportation costs, they often succeeded in subsequent decades.

Some ranchers concentrated on goods not susceptible to spoilage and inexpensively shipped by sea. James Irvine and the Bixby brothers, who stocked several ranches with sheep, hired Indians as shearers, and sent their wool by water to San Francisco, Boston, and New York, proved that lands which had failed as cattle ranges could be profitably operated as sheep ranches.⁴⁸ Others, impressed by the availability of farmland at low prices, resorted to large-scale production. The San Fernando Farm Association, a group of San Francisco capitalists which planted nearly 60,000 acres of wheat in the San Fernando Valley, demonstrated that extensive agriculture could increase yields, reduce expenses, and assure profits.⁴⁹ Still others cultivated crops which flourished nowhere in the United States but in southern California. J. de Barth Shorb and his San Gabriel Wine and Vineyard Company, which grew vines, produced wines, and distilled brandies, received returns that enabled the corporation to maintain the ranch at a time of rising values.⁵⁰

Although these ranches (and others like them) covered thousands and even tens of thousands of acres, they differed as completely from the historic ranchos as the Americans did from the Mexicans. Whereas the ranchos needed only abundant herds and relied largely on involuntary labor, the ranches required substantial sums of capital and hired mainly wage earners. Whereas the ranchos produced for immediate household consumption and provided their own necessities, the ranches produced for the future demands of distant markets and depended upon outsiders for essential goods. And whereas the ranchos fostered stable personal relationships and achieved social self-sufficiency, the ranches were strictly economic enterprises in which owners and employees were tied only by money. These differences were indeed the most striking evidence of the transformation of the southern California countryside.

Other ranchers tried to escape the fate of their predecessors not by more efficient production but by subdivision and sale of their lands. This alternative had not been feasible before the 1870's when inflated values and elevated expectations inhibited potential sellers and dubious titles and heavy encumbrances discouraged prospective purchasers. Also, most rancheros considered proprietorship socially as well as economically beneficial and for that reason refused to dispose of even a fraction of their holdings. By contrast, the new owners recognized the risks inherent in these immense but inefficient estates and promised the purchasers free and clear titles. They also evaluated property not by estimating its social connotations but by measuring profits from its production against interest on its market value. "What is the good of so much land that does not pay any income?" they asked. "The best thing to be done is to sell everything and convert all into cash and then invest in something that will yield a sure income."⁵¹

Furthermore, the market for farmland, which was severely limited before the Civil War, improved with the increase of migration after 1865. Impressed by the thousands, even tens of thousands, of acres capable of producing one hundred bushels of corn each, the newcomers envisioned southern California as a region of unparalleled opportunity.⁵² In response to their demand, many ranchers tentatively offered their land for sale. They "are beginning to see that men and women are more profitable than cattle," reported one observer; "that a small number of thoroughbred cows and sheep is better than a large stock of worthless animals; that a thousand acres of land well cultivated is more profitable than 10,000 lying waste; that 500 families on the fourth of a 40,000 acre tract more than doubles the value of the remaining 30,000."⁵³ The ranchers then divided their estates into farms of twenty, forty, and eighty acres, promoted them as the choicest in all California, and sold them to the immigrants. By 1877, according to the *Los Angeles Express*, there were "but a few of the old ranches that have not been cut up" in Los Angeles and vicinity.⁵⁴

The newcomers who settled on the ranchos lived and labored much like farmers elsewhere in the United States. "I now own a farm in the El Monta of one hundred acres," one pioneer wrote from the western San Gabriel Valley, "with forty enclosed with a live fence and a good house in the middle of my field, on a gentle elevation."⁵⁵ He and others like him grew corn, wheat, grapes, and fruit for the market, not for themselves, and met the expenses of ownership and cultivation as well as bought the necessities and luxuries of life from the proceeds. They erected modest homes instead of elaborate haciendas and

lived there with their wives, children, and perhaps one or two hired workers, not with assorted relatives and retainers. In sum, the American farmers, unlike the Mexican rancheros, did not have the land or the inclination to establish self-sufficient households in southern California.

The emergence of commercial ranches and small farms transformed the countryside around Los Angeles. The amount of cultivated acreage increased more than a hundredfold, and the number of existing farms in 1880 nearly equaled the number of improved acres in 1850. The value of agricultural land multiplied twenty times, and the value of buildings and equipment thirty times. The combined harvest of wheat, barley, and corn in 1850 totaled less than 3 per cent of the yield of corn alone in 1880. Of all the major products, only cattle did not record a substantial increase in value. Reflecting and measuring this material progress, Los Angeles County's population grew tenfold, from 4,000 to 34,000, and its assessed valuation multiplied nine times, from \$2 million to \$19 million.⁵⁶ And no less important, the ranchers and farmers who wrought these changes became dependent in ways the rancheros had never been on economic intermediaries and external institutions.

Both the ranchers and the farmers required the assistance of merchants to sell their produce in southern California and the western states or to ship it on commission to San Francisco and the eastern cities. They also relied on tradesmen for food and clothing, implements and furniture, and a variety of other necessities and luxuries which their specialized estates did not provide. They employed only enough workers to produce cash crops, and depended on local artisans and manufacturers for such crafts as carpentry and such goods as farm equipment. They often bound their properties in complicated legal arrangements, borrowed capital to survive in the competitive economy, and generated opportunities for lawyers and bankers too. And because the Americans rarely found full emotional gratification within their ranches and farms, they sought outside social, fraternal, and religious affiliations.⁵⁷

The repercussions profoundly affected Los Angeles. So long as self-sufficient ranchos covered the countryside, it remained an agricultural village with no unique function in the region's economy or society. The failure of the ranchos, however, generated opportunities for urban enterprises and associations which transformed the Mexican pueblo into an American town. The extent of this transformation was roughly measurable by the increase in population. With only 1,200 persons in

1840, the pueblo was the largest settlement in California; yet with 1,610 inhabitants a decade later, it was surpassed by the inland towns and coastal ports of the gold country. Then in response to the region's progress, Los Angeles expanded from 4,385 residents in 1860 to 5,728 in 1870, 11,183 in 1880, and approximately 20,000 in 1885.⁵⁸ Compared with San Francisco, northern California's metropolis, Los Angeles had grown little; but from the perspective of the pueblo, as Table 1 reveals, it had advanced considerably.

The character of the transformation was revealed by the occupations of the newcomers. Unlike the Californians, the Americans worked as grocers and druggists, retail and commission merchants, painters, plumbers, carpenters, and masons, physicians and attorneys, bankers and realtors, manufacturers of brick, millers of flour, and distillers of wine.⁵⁹ Their trades, crafts, professions, and industries facilitated contact between the countryside and town, encouraged a crude interdependence within the urban economy, and fostered the separation of business activities and family households. The expectations of the Americans also differed from those of the Californians. They were not only accustomed to higher standards of personal comfort and public convenience, but, as most of them had consciously chosen to work and live in Los Angeles, self-interest and civic pride dictated that their anticipations justify their actions. "They believe their city and county to be the choicest part of the earth," a perceptive visitor observed, "and are determined that no one shall have it in his power to point out wherein it is wanting."⁶⁰

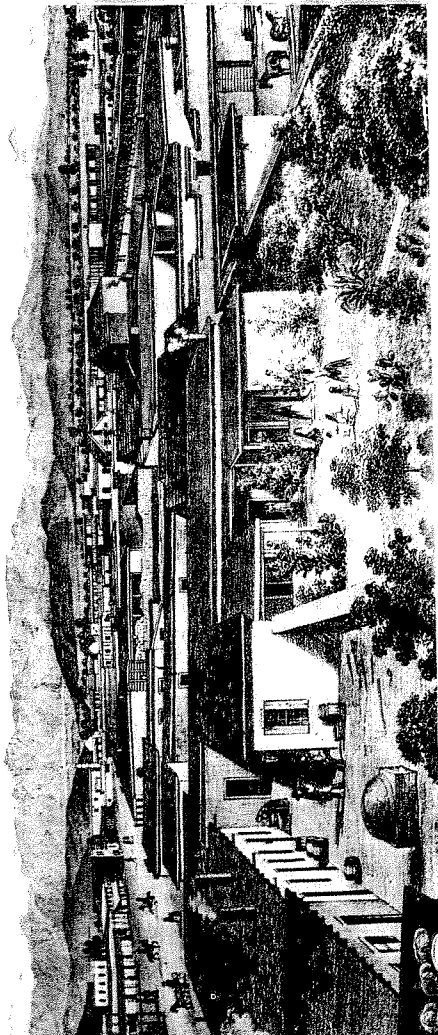
Thus Mexican civilization all but vanished in southern California. While a few great ranchos were still intact, they were operated as commercial ranches and interspersed with small farms. Specialized agri-

TABLE 1. Population Growth in Los Angeles and San Francisco, 1850-1880

Year	Total population		Rate of growth	
	Los Angeles	San Francisco	Los Angeles	San Francisco
1850	1,610	34,776	—	—
1860	4,385	56,802	172%	63%
1870	5,728	149,473	27	163
1880	11,183	233,959	95	57

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: Volume I. Population* (Washington, 1931), pp. 18-19.

cultural units supplanted self-sufficient households everywhere in the countryside. Likewise, the pueblo of Los Angeles all but disappeared. While vineyards and orchards were still cultivated, their owners were principally in the wine, fruit, and real estate businesses. Merchants, artisans, professionals, and manufacturers replaced agriculturists throughout the settlement. Indeed, nowhere in southern California was the new order and new destiny promised by the conquerors in the 1840's more evident than in the emergence of Los Angeles as an American town by the 1880's.



1. Los Angeles in 1857



2. Los Angeles in 1873