

History Comes Alive!

by Hynda Rudd,
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Tales From the City Archives

THE RANCHOS:

LA's Original Landowners

The term *ranch* means "landed property granted by Spanish and Mexican colonial authorities to encourage civilian settlement, reduce the influence of the missions, and reward soldiers for military service." These granted lands most often referred to as Spanish Ranchos were in reality granted during the Mexican era after 1836. The *rancheros* (the title applicants) sought land close to water and Indian laborers.

More than 50 grants were issued in Los Angeles [County], 11 before 1822 and 39 between 1823 and 1848. (Remember that there was no City of Los Angeles prior to 1850.) The grant giving increased rapidly after the mission secularization of 1835. The earlier development of the mission system, under the Spanish, was to civilize the natives and assist them to understand formalized government. Land size of the *ranchos* were from the smallest of 1,000 acres to the largest estates of 48,000 acres. This did not include larger land grants comparable to community or citywide sizes.

At this time, these properties did not always fit within the parameters of the City of Los Angeles. Oftentimes, some of the ranchos were partially in our beloved City, while other parts of the same granted land remained within the County. For example, the Rafael Rancho (1784 and 1789) consisted of land of the future cities of Glendale and La Cañada that belonged to the County, while Eagle Rock would eventually become a community within the City of Los Angeles.

It must also be noted that there were many other *ranchos* not described in this article because they do not fit into the topic, but they often touched each other, in a contiguous manner, very much like our own United States paradigm.

The oldest land grant *ranch* in Los Angeles is known by various names, but officially it was named *La Reina de Los Angeles sobre El Rio y Valle de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles de Porciúncula* (the Queen of Angels on the banks of the River and Valley of Our Lady of the Angels of the Porciúncula) by the Spanish Governor Felipe de Neve in 1781. Presently, it covers downtown Los Angeles. When originally given, it was around the land of the Plaza for a distance of three miles in each direction or 36 square miles. Acreage varies by different sources. One calculation is 17,172 acres, while another states 23,040 acres.

The second oldest *ranch* within the City limits of Los Angeles was issued in 1784 and called the San Pedro Rancho (originally called Dominquez), consisting of today's community of Wilmington and other modern cities in the County. The 43,119 acres was given to Juan Jose Dominquez, the applicant landholder. His story gives the reader one of the best examples of what the life of a *ranchero* was like.

Juan Jose Dominquez was a 65-year-old retired land-hungry veteran of the Gaspar de Portola expedition from Baja California to the north in 1769. Dominquez, and others like him, experienced fighting Indians, hard work, poor food and scurvy. He had fought under their commander and colonial Gov. Pedro Fages, who gave Dominquez and others permission to place their cattle on land of their own choosing. He drove his 200 head of cattle and herd of horses from San Diego to an area near the mouth of the Los Angeles River. At that point, on the slope of a hill, he had



A map of the original ranchos. Used with permission.

several huts built with corrals and established what was to eventually be known as Rancho San Pedro. In the early years, this rancho even included the 31,000 acres of the Rancho Palos Verdes.

The third *ranch*, the San Rafael (originally called *La Zanja*, the ditch) also became granted property in 1794 and again in 1798. The recipient of the 36,403 acres was Corporal Jose Maria Verdugo. According to authors Leonard and Dale Pitt in their most useful volume, *Los*

Angeles A to Z: An Encyclopedia of the City and County, the original family name was spelled *Berdugo*. As stated above, Eagle Rock became a community within the City of Los Angeles. This property was on the left bank of the Los Angeles River and extended to the Arroyo Seco (dry riverbed or creek, but in the Los Angeles area it refers to the bed that originates in the San Gabriel Mountains and eventually into the Los Angeles River).

The fourth *ranch*, the Los Feliz, was granted in 1796,



Pio Pico, the last governor of California during the Mexican period, 1836-46.

covering the Griffith Park area and containing 6,647 acres. The land holder was Corporal Jose Vicente Feliz. He was one of the original Spanish settlers in the Los Angeles area in 1781.

The fifth land grant *rancho* within the City of Los Angeles, San Antonio, was granted in 1810. The 29,513 acres covering south and east of the City was granted to Corporal Antonio Maria Lugo. He was considered a patriarch in the local community. Lugo was considered the quintessential *Californio*. That term refers to Mexicans born or living in California during rule of Spain and Mexico.

The sixth *rancho*, given in 1821, was named Los Palos Verdes and had 13,629 acres that included San Pedro and Palos Verdes. The titled applicant was Jose Dolores Sepulveda. This property sat northwesterly of San Pedro while bounded on three sides by the Pacific Ocean.

The seventh *rancho* within today's City limits was named La Brea (originally called Las Animas) in 1828. The property was the Hancock Park district of Los Angeles that had 4,439 acres. Antonio Rocha was the land grantee. Between this *rancho* and the City limits of Los Angeles was considerable property owned by the United States Government, acquired under the preemption and homestead laws.

The eighth *rancho* given in 1828, the San Vicente y Santa Monica, had 30,260 acres that covered today's West Los Angeles area. The land grantee was Francisco Sepulveda. He had been a Spanish officer, and founded a family branch in the El Pueblo area.

The ninth *rancho* was Cienega o Paso de la Tijera, granted in 1843. The acreage of 4,481 includes the Crenshaw district of Los Angeles. Vincente Sanchez became the landholder. In the 1860s, when Los Angeles had become an official city, the Common Council opened Sanchez Street, named for the family. It was opposite the northern section of Arcadia Block, passed through properties of esteemed pioneers including Vincente Sanchez, Pio Pico, Ignacio Coronel and others, ending at the Plaza.

The 10th *rancho*, *El Encino* (originally the Reyes), was granted in 1845. It is today's Encino and had 4,461 acres. This property was entirely within the San Fernando Valley. Vincente de la Osa was the grantee. Fifteen years after the purchase of the property, de la Osa advertised that he would accommodate travelers by way of his El Encino ranch, but visitors must pay as one goes, acting on the good old rule.

The 11th *rancho* was Ex-Mission San Fernando, granted in 1846. It covered 116,858 acres and was granted to Eulogio de Celis. The property was in the San Fernando Valley and was sold during the Mexican War by Pio Pico, California's last Mexican Governor.

Understanding the *rancho period* is complex. There are a number of reasons for this. First, different sources quote different acreage for the *ranchos*. Second, the Mexican period, starting in 1836, attempted to secularize the preceding Spanish period, 1781-1835, which used religious reasoning for its development and recordkeeping. This revisionism causes problems for the archivist.

Also, our local and federal governments worked with the *rancho* owners, often second, third and sometimes fourth generation-owners of the property. Many of these original ranchos were sold or sub divided, etc.

The information I've put together here is only the very beginning of this very important subject. I heartily invite you, if so desired, to search further for additional information. Material on some of the land grants can be found in the City Archives. Good luck in your pursuit.

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Photos courtesy Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library, Carolyn Cole, photo archive director.



The statue of Spanish Governor Felipe de Neve, in the Olvera Street Plaza.

For L.A. History Buffs

■ Comprehensive history of L.A. City government is completed and published. Producer is *Alive!* columnist Hynda Rudd.

An ambitious nine-year project that documents the development of the Los Angeles City government will be published Sept. 4, the birthday of the City of Los Angeles, when the 24 chapters, prologue, epilogue and appendices comprising two volumes will be presented to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the City Council.

This massive study, *The Development of Los Angeles City Government: An Institutional History, 1850-2000*, is intended to fill a gap in the historical record of urban development in the United States created by the absence of such a review of the nation's second largest city. The work provides specific reasons for creation of the great variety of councils and commissions, departments and divisions, that came into being over a time span of 150 years, as well as profiles of the leaders who made them succeed or fail.



Sponsored by the Los Angeles City Historical Society with the writing/editing component funded by the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation, the work examines all aspects of the city government: its structures, constitution, administration, finances, courts, public safety, health, education, recreation, parks, libraries and cultural activities, harbors and airports, and water supply. Additionally, it examines planning enterprises dealing with development, transportation, housing and human services. Unique aspects are inclusion of chapters on population changes, ethnicity, intergovernmental relations and global influences on the City's government.

Senior editor Tom Sitton, retired historian at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, reports that this collection of essays is the work of more than 30 authors, all prominent scholars of the several aspects of Los Angeles governance, and associate editors. The prologue and epilogue were written, respectively, by Dr. Doyce B. Nunis Jr., longtime editor of the *Southern California Quarterly*, and Dr. Raphael Sonenshein, distinguished California State University Fullerton political scientist, and Executive Director of the

Los Angeles City Neighborhood Council Review Commission.

The project director and moving force behind the endeavor is Hynda L. Rudd, first and retired Los Angeles City Archivist, and *Alive!* columnist. Realizing that the City's archives hold a valuable and colorful treasure trove of information, including every minute book and index since the City was incorporated in 1850, she set about arranging they be made accessible to all members of the community.

Hynda won support for the project from the Los Angeles City Historical Society, and proceeded to organize a board of editors and an advisory board of several local scholars. Authors were selected from among a rich array of established historians, political scientists, educators and governmental administrators who are experts in the various aspects of the city's governance.

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A Note on Last Month's Column

In last month's article, I noted my sadness and disappointment that the City did not fund a position for either Archivist or Assistant Archivist. In 1991, the Assistant Archivist position was lost due to a budget cut, and in 1995 another budget cut felled the Archivist position. I continue to be saddened to have to report this to the readers.

—Hynda Rudd