

Historical Ramblings

Between Secularization and Temperance

When we study the history of the Lompoc Valley, we find a lot about mission history and the “modern” period marked by the formation of the Lompoc Valley Land Company. But what about that period of time between the secularization of the California missions in 1834 and the arrival of temperance supporters some 40 years later?

After Mexico gained independence in 1821, the Mexican Governor of California effected the secularization of the Spanish missions. Much of the mission lands were granted to private petitioners, with no pay required. The only conditions were that the grantees should occupy the land, build a house and stock their properties with several hundred head of cattle. The 200,000 acres of La Purisima Mission were granted from 1837 to 1845.

The Lompoc Rancho and the Mission Vieja Rancho, including most of the Lompoc Valley were granted to Jose and Joaquin Carillo, who had already been occupying and utilizing the land. The formal grant gave them official control of 42,000 acres. For 20 years, the Carillos raised cattle in the valley, ignoring the productive mission orchards and gardens in the southern portion of the valley. The Carillos spent most of their days in Santa Barbara, employing a trusted majordomo to oversee the day-to-day operations of their great Lompoc Valley holdings. A corporal and ten to twenty vaqueros served under the majordomo, supervising vast herds of cattle and horses. An annual springtime activity was a “run through the mustard.” In late spring, the valley was covered in a sea of yellow mustard, growing higher than a man’s head. The mustard offered an ideal hiding place for cattle. Even after the plants died and dried, the forest of dry brown stalks furnished ample cover for the livestock. A “run through the mustard” was often necessary to round up the cattle.

With the discovery of California gold in 1848, cattle, formerly slaughtered for hides and sold for a few dollars, suddenly fetched unbelievable prices. From the Lompoc, Mission Vieja and neighboring ranchos, thousands of head of cattle were driven northward, bringing unheard of profits to the sellers. By 1855, with large imports of sheep, the development of farms devoted to the breeding and fattening of livestock on a large scale and the introduction of cattle from the Mississippi and Missouri Valleys, the California cattle industry

began to decline. The Carillos felt the pinch of hard times, with their names appearing on the 1856 delinquent tax list. They eventually lost their land holdings and the Lompoc and Mission Vieja Ranchos were sold in 1860 to the More brothers, who were prosperous cattlemen in their own right.

The early 1860s marked the end of cattle operations in the Lompoc Valley. Sheep now became the primary business. The mission padres at La Purisima had been famous for great flocks of sheep, which was considered a distasteful operation by the rancheros subsequently established on mission lands. The new generation of sheep barons was comprised of Americans from the midwest. Col. W.W. Hollister, W.H. Hollister and J.W. Cooper had established large flocks of sheep in the San Fernando Valley, driven by the thousands from Ohio and Missouri. In 1863, southern California was stricken by severe drought. Cooper, searching for better pastures, discovered the Lompoc Valley. He rented Lompoc Rancho lands from the More brothers at the rate of twenty cents per head of sheep. The Hollisters and Cooper immediately moved their flock of 11,500 to the valley in May of 1863. Upon their arrival, they witnessed the valley floor covered in yellow mustard and wild oats taller than their saddle horns. In autumn of that year the Lompoc and Mission Vieja ranchos were purchased by the Hollisters, Cooper and Tomas Dibblee for \$60,000.

In 1863 and 1864, the valley was decimated by drought. No grass grew and there was no food for the flocks. Hundreds of oaks were cut down so that the sheep might feast on the only foliage available. Of the 15,000 sheep were inventoried in 1864, only 5300 remained by 1865. The saving grace to Cooper and his partners was the sale of wool in 1864, netting \$22,000.

In the twelve years following the drought, the men purchased 165,000 acres, entirely from profits generated from their flocks of sheep. From 1865 until 1874, the Lompoc Valley was a shepherd's paradise. What venture could possibly replace the successful sheep business? The 1874 establishment of a temperance colony.