

Rancho Life (Handout #11)

Read aloud the below description of rancho life. After a discussion, ask students to complete the handout, Life on a Rancho (Handout #11a.)

Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821 and took over California. The Mexican Governor of California granted very large parcels of land called land grants, which became ranchos. The main business of the rancho was raising cattle. In addition, wheat and corn were raised along with the fruit trees and grapevines. There were many ranchos so each cattle owner had a unique brand to identify its cattle.

In the spring, the ranchos held a rodeo or roundup. During this time all the vaqueros, or cowboys, gathered the cattle, branded the calves, and separated the cattle to be killed for meat, hides, and tallow. Following the rodeo was a fiesta or party.

Cattle were the foundation of the rancho economy. The hides and tallow from cattle were traded for needed supplies on the rancho through a barter system. The hides were tanned and made into saddles, shoes, harnesses, and reatas. The tallow (hard fat obtained from parts of the bodies of cattle) was melted to make candles and soap. Each dried hide was worth approximately one dollar. Tools, cloth and spices were supplies purchased through trade.

The main job on the rancho was roping cattle and taming horses. Men also worked as house servants, harness makers, tanners, and carpenters. Other workers made tallow in large iron pots. Women cooked, sewed and cleaned.

There were no schools in California so most children were taught to read and write by a family member or a soldier who had been discharged and moved to the rancho. Most children, however, did not learn to read and write.