

## AGRICULTURE IN HISPANIC CALIFORNIA, 1850

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An integral part of Western frontier settlement in North America during the nineteenth century was the set of agricultural institutions that were employed to occupy the land. In most instances, these were successful institutions transferred from previously settled areas and usually required few modifications to fit the new environment. In California, the American pioneer encountered a radically different frontier in which traditional agricultural methods were not immediately applicable. In that new land, the Anglo was confronted with unfamiliar problems associated with a Mediterranean climate, a spiraling demand for food after the discovery of gold, uncertainties regarding land titles, and most importantly, an established agricultural system. Spanish agriculture, organized around the mission, had made impressive accomplishments as reflected in the many orchards, gardens, vineyards and irrigation works located along the California coast from San Diego to San Francisco. With the advent of the hide and tallow trade, intensive agriculture was replaced by the vast cattle ranchos of the Mexican period. As a whole, the Hispanic model encountered by the recent Anglo arrival in California in the late 1840's held few similarities with previous agricultural experience.

With annexation of California by the United States in 1848 and subsequent immigration, there occurred an inevitable conflict between Hispanic and Anglo agricultural systems. The resultant clash and resolution of differences between these two points of

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view resulted in a unique landscape reflecting characteristics of both Hispanic and Anglo agriculture. This compromise, however, was not immediate but was a gradual transition in which many new avenues were explored, some accepted and others rejected.<sup>1</sup> The initial stage of transition began shortly before 1850 and continued well into the decade of the 1870's. To gain insights into the transition, this paper investigates briefly the general agricultural patterns of Hispanic California in 1850 in order to provide a foundation for understanding the impact of Anglo immigration and landscape change in Hispanic California.

#### *Background information*

Data for this study were gathered from the 1850 manuscript census of agriculture for California. The manuscript census lists 46 individual farm characteristics for each farmer and, in addition, groups farmers according to county of residence. Although eleven coastal counties were contained in the study area in 1850, the manuscript census provides data for only eight of them. Data for three counties, San Francisco, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara, are not available because the census schedules were accidentally destroyed or lost. Another problem arises from the fact that the agricultural census of 1850 was not the most accurate for recording Hispanic agriculture. The census was designed to enumerate livestock and crops normally encountered in other sections of the United States and not the extensive livestock ranchos of California organized to produce hides and tallow for barter and the few acres of crops grown for local consumption. Regardless of these shortcomings, the 1850 census is the best data source available for a study of agriculture in early California.

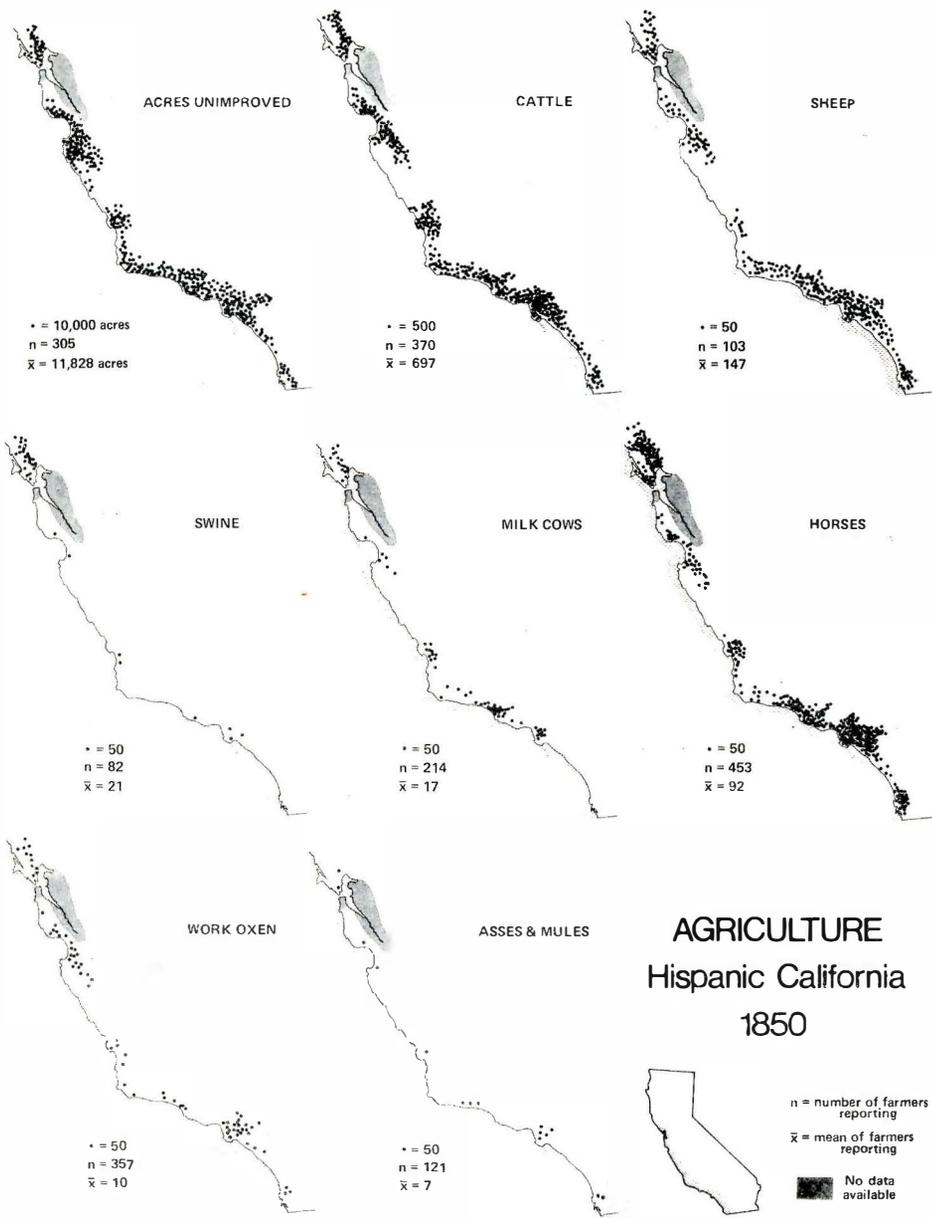
Data for the eight Hispanic counties were coded and tabulated by computer. The number of farmers listed by the manuscript census as residing within the study area in 1850 totaled 612, with 249 indicating Anglo surnames and 383 reporting Spanish surnames. Although 46 farm characteristics were to be enumerated, only 26 were reported as occurring in the study area. Because of

space limitations, only the 16 most important agricultural characteristics are presented and discussed in this paper.

*Agricultural patterns of Hispanic  
California, 1850*

Figures 1 and 2 depict the distribution of selected farm characteristics of Hispanic California as enumerated in the manuscript census. In general, both maps illustrate the continuance of the narrow agricultural base developed during the Mexican period. Extensive farming was by far the dominant agricultural activity, with beef and grain comprising the major pursuits. The pattern as illustrated by the maps, however, is somewhat misleading in that not all of the 612 farmers in the study area reported every agricultural activity. Horses, for example, were reported most often, specifically by 453 farmers, and among grains, barley was mentioned least often, by only 18 farmers. The varying number of farmers reporting given activities suggests that the grain and livestock pattern, although important, varied by farmer and that some degree of specialization was occurring.

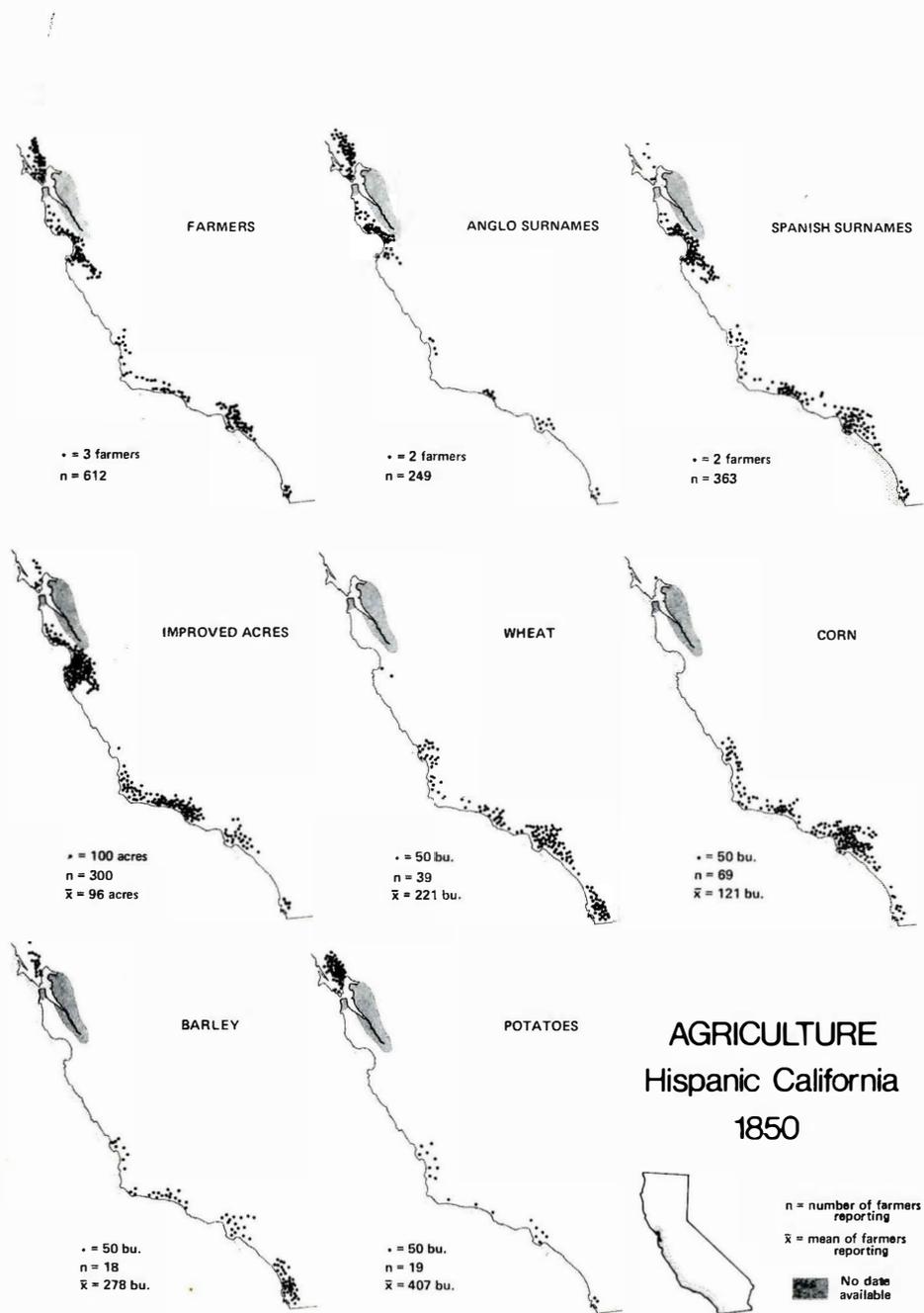
Crops and livestock may have varied by farmer, but interestingly, the overall distribution was somewhat consistent throughout the study area. Except for swine and potatoes, the general pattern reflected a heavier concentration of agriculture in the South, declining somewhat towards the North. This trend, however, may be a result of losing the data for San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Contra Costa counties. Along with this decline, there was a corresponding reduction in farm size and productivity. Farms decreased from an average of 12,000 acres in the southern part of the study area to an average of 8,500 acres in the northern part, huge by American standards but common by Mexican standards. Cattle declined from an average of 1,000 head per farm in the South to less than 500 head per farm in the North. The lesser importance of cattle in the North was offset by an increase in the raising of swine. Horses and sheep, on the other hand, were reared somewhat consistently throughout the study area, with an average per farm of 92 and 147, respectively. An interesting point regarding sheep



Source: U.S. Manuscript Census of Agriculture, California, 1850

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Figure 1. Agriculture in Hispanic California, Animals.



Source: U.S. Manuscript Census of Agriculture, California, 1850

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Figure 2. Agriculture in Hispanic California, Crops.

is that no farmer reported wool. Wheat and corn were primarily southern crops, averaging 240 and 131 bushels per farm, respectively in the South, whereas very few farmers reported wheat or corn in the North. In fact, in the latter area both wheat and corn seemed to be replaced by potatoes.

Although California's population surged from 14,000 in 1848 to over 92,000 in 1850 as a result of the Gold Rush, there is no evidence of a corresponding shift to intensive agriculture as might be expected. Despite the fact that the major part of this population increase consisted of immigrants from elsewhere in the United States,<sup>2</sup> agriculture in the study area in 1850 reflected few of the Anglo farming characteristics usually associated with other frontier settlements in the United States. Rather, large farms often reaching 20,000 acres in extent and emphasizing livestock formed the basic farming units and stood in contrast to those farms in previously settled frontier areas. Surprisingly, few intensive crops were grown for the expanding commercial market in the northern part of the study area. In effect, the inability of the agricultural system in Hispanic California to keep pace with rising demand forced importation of food from Oregon, Hawaii, and Chile.<sup>3</sup>

The lack of an intensive agricultural sector is striking considering the number and distribution of Anglo surnames--farmers who would be expected to engage in agricultural activities that reflected their Eastern background. Although 41 per cent of the farmers reported Anglo surnames in the 1850 census schedules, not all of these were recent arrivals to Hispanic California. For instance, 43 per cent of the Anglo surname farmers had actually arrived in California before 1848. Many had come in the early 1840's and had accepted land from the Mexican regime in hopes of participating in the profitable hide and tallow trade.<sup>4</sup> The remaining 57 per cent had been engaged in farming less than two years, hardly enough time to establish well-organized and productive farms considering the hectic circumstances. It should be stressed, however, that these recent Anglo arrivals constituted

only 17 per cent of the total population of both Anglo and Spanish surname farmers. Thus the relatively little change in the agricultural system can possibly be attributed to the small proportion of new farmers and to an insatiable market which paid high prices for almost any commodity produced.

### *Conclusions*

This paper has offered a brief investigation of the general agricultural patterns of Hispanic California in an attempt to understand the impact of Anglo immigration in 1850. From the census data a number of tentative conclusions are suggested. Although farm size, type of crop, crop productivity, and in particular farmers by surname varied somewhat throughout the study area, the overall agricultural pattern did not exhibit a similar variation. In addition, there was surprisingly little difference between the agricultural pursuits of Anglo surnamed farmers and Spanish surnamed farmers, with both groups of farmers engaged in extensive activities. Considering the large population in 1850, the study area reflected a smaller than expected intensive agricultural sector. In general, it can be suggested that the agricultural base of Hispanic California in 1850 reflected a continuance of crops and livestock usually associated with Hispanic agriculture. Although culture contact between Anglo and Mexican set in motion a series of changes that eventually resulted in a significant alteration in the character of California's rural landscape, it would seem that the impact of Anglo immigration on the landscape of Hispanic California had yet to become important by 1850.

### *Acknowledgements*

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John E. Baur, "California Crops that Failed," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 45 (1966), pp. 41-68.

<sup>2</sup>Doris Marion Wright, "The Making of Cosmopolitan California: An Analysis of Immigration, 1848-1870," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 19 (1940), pp. 323-343.

<sup>3</sup>Rodman W. Paul, "The Beginnings of Agriculture in California: Innovation vs. Continuity," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 52 (1973), pp. 16-27.

<sup>4</sup>Hubert Howe Bancroft, "Pioneer Register and Index, 1542-1848," *History of California*, Vols. 1-6 (Santa Barbara: Wallace Hebbard, 1966).