REMNANTS OF THE RANCHOS IN THE URBAN PATTERN OF THE LOS ANGELES AREA

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California, save for the Colonies and Texas, is unique in America in that much of its best land was in private hands before it became part of the United States. Most of the present-day Los Angeles area, for example, was either owned by the Pueblo or held as ranchos at the time of the American annexation in 1848. The most extensive holdings, by far, were those of the owners of some 55 ranchos. Ranchos ranged from less than one to about 180 square miles in size, and contained one or more ranch headquarters centers. Thus when the Americans spread their traditional divisions over the land there was a significant distinction between occupied private holdings, irregularly bounded by metes and bounds, and empty public lands, surveyed by the regular Public Land Survey system.

The bulk of the traditional literature on Los Angeles includes copious material on the Pueblo and the ranchos, implying their importance to the modern urban dweller. Exactly how, and to what extent, these old land holdings are reflected in today's city patterns, however, is never explicitly stated. It is our purpose to examine these pre-American land divisions, particularly the ranchos, and assess their significance to the present-day urban features of the Los Angeles area. In addition it is hoped that findings concerning the persistence of pre-American property lines in this area may have application in other parts of California and elsewhere.

SPANISH AND MEXICAN LAND GRANTS

Spanish sovereignty, dating from the eighteenth century, produced four types of land holdings, which were modified somewhat under the twenty-six years of Mexican rule (1822-1848). The Spaniards founded missions of which two, San Gabriel Arcangel (1771) and San Fernando Rey (1797), were in the Los Angeles area. Pueblos were organized, including the Pueblo of Los Angeles (1781), and presidios were established, but not in our area. Some other lands were given to army veterans as ranchos. The Mexicans, when in control, secularized the missions, recovered mission land, and expanded the number of rancho holdings twentyfold. All of these activities affected land ownership patterns.

The two missions, in their operative period, occupied and used the land "for the benefit of the Indians." They did not own the land, but held it as "trustees." Nevertheless, they effectively controlled large blocks of land and discouraged, as far as possible, other types of land ownership nearby. During Mexican rule, under pressure from Californians, the missions were secularized and their holdings returned to the public domain. The missions were allowed to retain title only to land covered by buildings, cemeteries, and gardens: about 190 acres at San Gabriel and 77 acres at San Fernando.
1. San Francisco
2. Simi
3. El Escorpion
4. Ex Mission de San Fernando
5. Encino
6. Topanga Malibu Sequit
7. Boca de Santa Monica
8. San Vicente y Santa Monica
9. San José de Buenos Ayres
10. Rodeo de las Aguas
11. La Brea
12. La Ballona
13. Rincon de los Bueyes
14. Las Ciénegas
15. Cienega O Pasode La Tijera
16. Aguaje de Centenela
17. Sausal Redondo

18. San Pedro
19. Los Palos Verdes
20. Tujunga
21. Providencia
22. La Canada
23. San Rafael
24. Los Felis
25. City Lands
26. San Pasqual
27. Santa Anita
28. El Malino
29. San Gabriel Mission Lands
30. Rancho La Merced
31. Partrero Grande
32. Paso de Bartolo
33. Partrero de Felipe Lugo
34. Santa Gertrudes
35. Tajauta
36. Los Cerritos
37. Los Alamitos
38. Los Coyotes
39. La Habra
40. La Puente
41. San Francisquito
42. Azusa de Duarte
43. Azusa Dalton
44. Addition to San Jose
45. San Jose
46. Los Nogales
47. Rincon La Brea
48. San Juan Cajon de Santa Ana
49. Las Bolsas
50. La Bolsa Chica
51. Santiago de Santa Ana
52. San Joaquin
53. Lomas de Santiago
54. Santa Ana de Chino
55. Canon de Santana

Figure 1
The Pueblo of Los Angeles, founded as an agricultural settlement, was entitled to four square leagues of land, about 28 square miles. Settlers were granted free house lots and farming land, with the requirement that the land be improved with a house and trees. In five years those that had fulfilled the conditions were granted title to their land. Unclaimed pueblo land remained as common property.

Several rancho grants were made by local Spanish authorities to retired army veterans, and some of these were in the Los Angeles area. With the advent of Mexican control, however, the rancho period began in earnest and reached a peak in the 1830’s and 1840’s. The Mexican government assumed control of the public domain, including vast tracts of the best land formerly held by the missions. This land was given willingly and without compensation to worthy Mexican citizens in large blocks (up to 11 square leagues, about 77 square miles). Applicants had only to petition the governor, describe the lands desired, and produce a crude map of it. The grantee had to occupy the land, stock it with cattle, build a home, plant some trees and the land was his. The bulk of the ranchos in the Los Angeles area were acquired in this way.

AMERICAN SOVEREIGNTY

Under American sovereignty it was necessary to bring the vague Spanish and Mexican titles into conformity with American legal practice. To that end a Land Commission was established to confirm titles and, in practice, a review by the courts was also necessary. The small mission holdings were recognized, and the title to the four-square leagues of pueblo land was given to the corporation. But, because of poor records, validation of the rancho titles required much time. Now the ambiguous titles, inexact descriptions and vague boundaries of an earlier more relaxed period had to be precisely defined. The land owners hired trained surveyors and Yankee lawyers to clarify disputes and to present their claims. Long delays were common,—with 17 years being reported as the average time necessary to confirm a rancho title. In the interim legal fees and other costs bankrupted many rancho owners. When the titles were finally confirmed, and an official survey by the Surveyor General of California approved, a United States patent was issued. The 55 ranchos in the Los Angeles area, as confirmed, are shown in Figure 1.

American sovereignty, too, brought segregation of land not granted as well as invalidated claims into the public domain for survey and sale (Figure 1). Surveying was difficult and drawn out over several decades because of the problem of determining what was public domain and what was private land. However, both the San Bernardino Meridian and Base Line were run in the fifties. These two lines were extended over both public land and private claims, and were utilized as reference points in the patents of the private land grants. The subdivision of public land into townships and sections, though started in a small way in 1854, continued slowly through the sixties and seventies. Much of the public domain in the mountains was withdrawn from entry and remains today as the Angeles National Forest. Most of the remaining public land was settled.
under the Desert Land Act—land the Surveyor General certified could be irrigated. Thus, from early American occupancy, two cadastral survey systems existed side by side in the Los Angeles area.

**Persistence of Rancho Boundaries as Boundaries**

It is ironic, but not surprising, that the rancho boundaries, which under Spanish-Mexican rule were not of vital importance, have persisted strongly into the present. They remain significant as boundaries of private holdings, as the boundaries of counties and cities, and in other ways.

In the vast majority of instances rancho boundaries are still boundaries between land owned by different individuals. Separate sale at different times and under varying circumstances would account for this characteristic. Carpenter, further, in surveying Rancho Encino, found that with one minor exception, subdivision tracts also stopped at the rancho boundaries.\(^1\) Significantly, a few ranchos have remained almost intact into this century. Topanga Malibu Sequit was not subdivided until the 1920's. El Escorpión, lately known as the Platt Ranch, was held as a single parcel until 1958, and the Irvine Ranch is substantially intact today (Figure 1).

As political units developed, portions of rancho boundaries often became political boundaries. Figure 2 shows the coincidence between political boundaries and former rancho boundaries as it exists today.\(^2\) Some 88.6 miles of boundary coincidence occurs, even at this late date, City boundaries, being relatively temporary due to liberal annexation laws, have often coincided with rancho boundaries for periods of time, only to be changed. Rancho boundaries, on the other hand, generally remain as land ownership boundaries, and thus annexations, on occasion, have rancho boundaries. These expanding annexations may account for the fragmented city-rancho boundaries.

County boundaries, being less dynamic because of the need for state approval of change, and a generally early fixing of location, exhibit a higher degree of coincidence with rancho boundaries (Figure 2). The legal description of the boundary in the northwest portion of Los Angeles county, for example, includes the rancho boundary.\(^3\)

**Rancho Boundaries in the Street Pattern**

Rancho boundaries are not only reflected in the present political pattern of the area, but they have had a significant influence on today's street pattern.

The very early roads were mere trails, casually located, generally connecting rancho headquarters with rancho headquarters, with no relationship to rancho boundaries. Even the rancho headquarters, although located with relationship to available water, were transitory and impermanent. The land was used almost solely for open range grazing, without fences, and little or no attention was given to trespass.

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2 All of the boundaries and other data is taken from the most recent USGS topographic maps of the area, 1:24,000. The culture was revised in the early 1950's.
With the coming of Anglo-Saxon culture, and the spread of cultivated agriculture, the establishment of precise boundary lines was emphasized and trespass frowned upon. In some instances rights-of-way were dedicated and roads developed between property holdings. Thus trespass was minimized and the amount of land an individual owner must contribute for a dedicated road reduced.

Today about 173 miles of roadway in the Los Angeles area coincides with former rancho boundaries (Figure 3). The total length of rancho boundaries (excluding the seashore) was about 684 miles, thus about 25 per cent of these former boundaries coincide with present roads. However, for about 132 miles the rancho boundaries are located in rugged terrain, unfavorable for road construction. Excluding these areas, roads coincide with about 31 per cent of the remaining rancho boundaries. In the few
instances where the boundaries followed the cardinal directions the
degree of road coincidence is high—about 65 per cent of these bound-
aries are traced by a road.

Further, since the total length of streets within the Los Angeles area
exceeds by many times the total length of rancho boundaries, one is

impressed by the fact that over half of the total length of boundary road
coincidence follows major traffic arteries. Sepulveda, Ramona, Whittier,
Redondo Beach, Washington, Wilshire and Pico Boulevards are examples.

**Street Disruption and Distortion**

Many cross streets are interrupted at old rancho boundaries, forming
an additional significant boundary-street relationship. In some instances,
intersecting streets do not cross the boundary-coinciding streets cleanly,
but instead are offset by distances ranging from a few inches to as much as
200 feet. In other cases where no offset occurs, the cross streets bend at the rancho boundary and continue at an angle. Occasionally, streets are both offset and continue at an angle. In another type of disruption, streets dead-end at the boundary. Streets may either enter, but not cross, roads running along the boundary or, if no road is present, they may simply end at the boundary.

Figure 4

Within the Los Angeles area, some 66 miles of old rancho boundary, which coincide with roads, are marked by street disruption. An additional 9.5 miles of old boundary, not traced by roads, also shows clearly disrupted
streets. Street disruption is particularly noticeable along the boundaries between public lands and ranchos. Of the total disruption found, about 40 per cent (or some 31 miles) occurs along these boundaries.

The northern boundary of Rancho Providencia (Figure 4) coinciding with the present Burbank Boulevard, is an excellent example of disruption. It illustrates disruption at an angle, and also dead-ending. The western boundary of the rancho exhibits these characteristics too, as well as political coincidence. Other examples include the areas around Sepulveda Blvd., between Rancho San Pedro and Rancho Palos Verdes, Indiana Street, separating the eastern boundary of the Pueblo from public land, and Whittier Boulevard running along the boundary between Rancho Santa Gertrudis (Colina) and public lands to the north.

Finally, in numerous instances, the present street pattern within entire ranchos is oriented, in large degree, with respect to the boundaries of the ranch. In these cases street alignment often changes at or near the rancho boundary. Such streets cover large areas, but a typical example might again be Rancho Providencia (a portion of which appears on Figure 4). Other examples are in sections of Rancho Las Cienagas and Rancho Santa Gertrudis.

In an extension of this idea, there are a few examples of orientation of street pattern to a rancho line but not exactly coinciding with it. For example, street alignment on the north side of the Irvine Ranch, developed within the ranch and running parallel to the boundary, extends a mile beyond the border for a distance of 13 miles.

Other Cultural Coincidences

Several other cultural features in the Los Angeles area coincide with rancho boundaries. The most important of these are railroad right-of-ways, of which about 12 miles in the area mark former rancho boundary lines. In a few instances power line easements, for perhaps a dozen miles, follow boundaries which do not parallel a road, principally in hilly country. In a few other areas drainage ditches also follow boundary lines for limited distances.

Rancho Headquarters and Other Focal Points

Ranchos, of course, not only possessed definable boundaries, but were also the scene of houses, barns and corrals making some kind of ranch headquarters center. Not all of the ranch houses shown on Figure 1 existed at any one time, and many of them were poor, unsubstantial dwellings with a transitory life. A few were more permanent and perhaps a half dozen are still standing. It is significant, however, that in terms of today's landscape, none of the spots chosen for rancho centers has developed into an urban focal point of any sort. Generally they are in locations that today have no observable centralizing qualities. (The Pueblo, of course, is a major exception to the generalization applying to the ranchos, as the civic center of Los Angeles is anchored but a stone's throw from the original Plaza. However, the two missions, although still standing, like the rancho headquarters have not been able to maintain their focal qualities.)
Perhaps the most obvious explanation of this loss of focal qualities of the old rancho centers lies in the increasing sophistication in the control of water supplies. Generally the older ranch headquarters were located adjacent to a flowing spring, whereas such locations were less important to urban man in the era of well, irrigation ditches and water mains in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Also, it is logical that the early sale of ranch land for speculative townsites generally did not include the ranch headquarters. Often this portion would be the last area to be subdivided.

Summary

The past existence of Spanish and Mexican land ownership institutions in the Los Angeles area has repeatedly raised questions as to the present significance of these institutions. That certain tangible remnants of pre-American settlement have persisted is obvious from a casual observation of the street pattern of downtown Los Angeles or acquaintance with several locally-famous landmarks such as Olivera Street, Casa de Adobe, and the San Gabriel and San Fernando missions. Remnants of the more extensive ranchos, which occupied a majority of the land in the Los Angeles area, are less familiar, although the historical literature of the area is filled with references to the importance of these institutions and the livelihood of their occupants.

Most of the tangible remains of ranchos have disappeared as a result of the tremendous influx of population from other parts of the United States, combined with the extensive nature of pre-American settlement, impermanence of adobe structures, poorly-marked roads, and evolution of settlement location factors. Rancho boundaries, because of their adoption into American institutions for the purpose of legal land description and the tendency for them to remain as property lines, have, however, often become expressed in urban patterns. Unmistakable correlations exist between these boundaries and present property lines, city and county boundaries, streets, street disruptions, and other features.

The usefulness of these correlations is rather limited at the present time. It is extremely difficult to estimate the importance of quantitative statements on the present-day significance of the ranchos in urban patterns of the Los Angeles area. The correlations can be considered neither high nor low. Even though several of the major thoroughfares of the area coincide for extended distances with rancho boundaries, this coincidence and others might be considered small when it is remembered that only a little over 100 years ago the ranchos were the most important type of private land-holding of a predominantly Spanish-speaking population.

Other quantitative studies of the juxtaposition of the institutions of one culture upon another might prove rewarding. Several other areas of California were settled by Spaniards and Mexicans before the arrival of the Americans, as were portions of the American Southwest. Studies might be made of existing remnants of settlement in these areas and comparisons made between the extent of persistence and the factors influencing persistence in the Los Angeles area.