

California Living

The Rancho

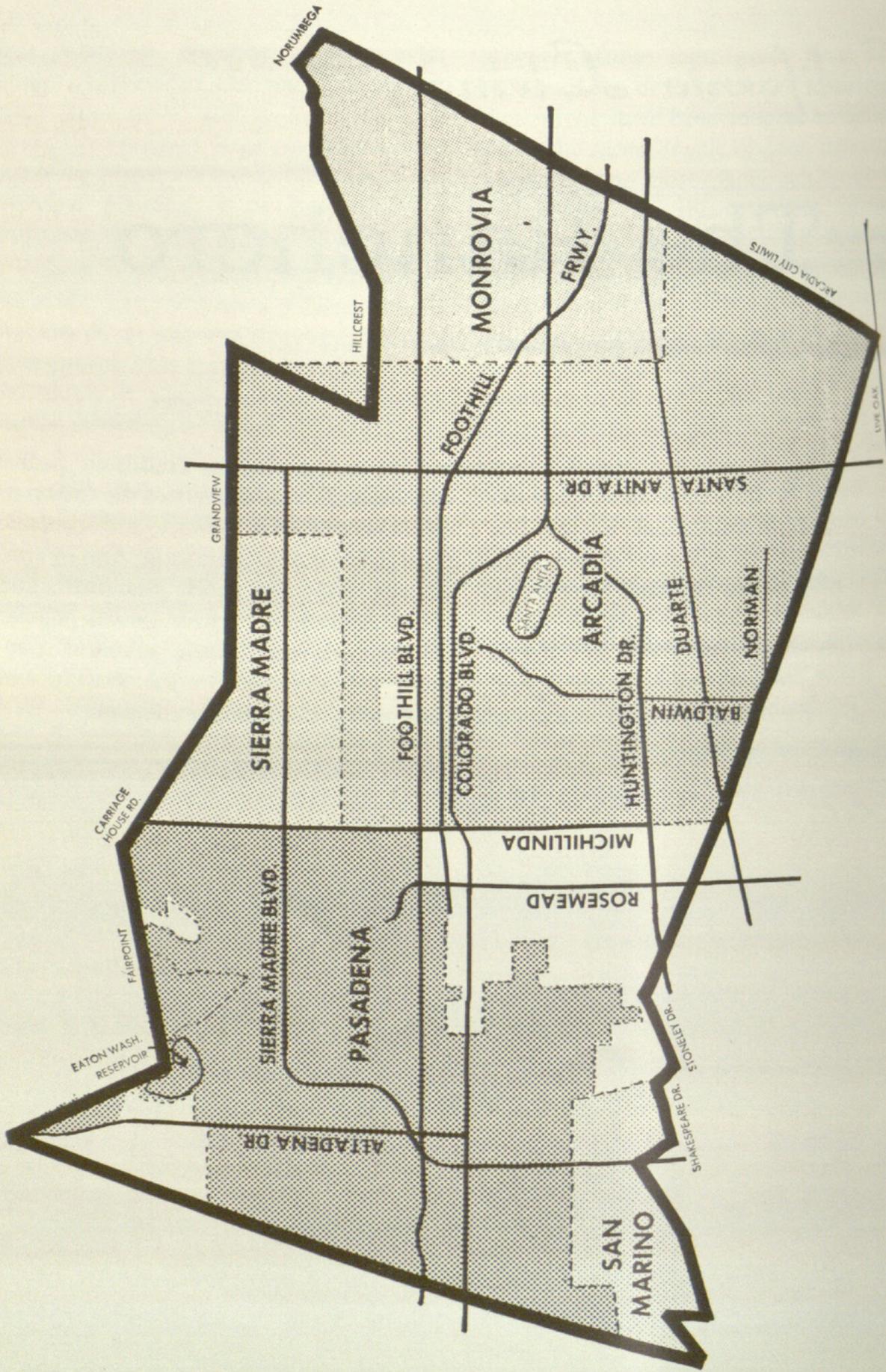
Sandy Snider

FROM EARLY TIME, man has been attracted by the fertile beauty of the area occupied in part today by the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum. First to settle on this rich land were Stone Age Shoshone Indians, whose primitive way of life abruptly gave way in 1769 to the greater plans of the King of Spain. Fully two hundred years after discovery

by Spanish explorers, Franciscan padres collaborated with soldiers of the Crown to establish religious, military, and economic footholds in Alta California. Arm in arm, Church and state gently persuaded, and often coerced, the native Indian population to relinquish their primitive freedoms in exchange for the security and comfort of the mission complex.



The Hugo Reid Adobe. During the early rancho period, flowers and shrubbery were a rare sight around the houses of the Californians — the threat of Indian raids demanded a free range of view.



The map shows the boundaries of Hugo Reid's original 13,316-acre Rancho Santa Anita and the present-day cities that land grant embraced.

Mission San Gabriel (1771) claimed a good many converts, Indians who would theoretically acquire Spanish culture and eventually enter society as new Spanish citizens. To implement their theory of total conversion, missions became more than simple centers of faith. Charged with instructing the natives in everything from the sacraments to brick-laying, the padres gradually became masters of strong economic units—missions became self-sustaining ranches complete with orchards, irrigation, livestock, and industries.

Rancho Santa Anita (the heart of which evolved into today's Arboretum) traces its origins to the mission period. As explained by an early California chronicler, Alfred Robinson, "The two 'ranchos' of St. Bernardino and Sta. Anita are included in the possessions of the Mission; the former of these has been assigned by the padres for the sole purpose of domesticating cattle, and is located some leagues distant, in a secluded valley among the mountains: the latter is for cultivation, and is one of the fairy spots to be met with so often in California."

Commanding vast acreage and free Indian labor, the mission system reached its high point in power and influence during the early years of the nineteenth century. Mexico's successful revolt against Spain in 1821 marked the beginning of the end of mission domination, however, as the new government insisted that the wealth and lands of the missions be turned over to the state. Accordingly, in 1833, government order secularized the missions, completely removing them from church control and granting their former landholdings to the new California pace-setters—the rancheros.

Rancho Santa Anita almost literally became free for the asking to any Mexican or naturalized citizen who promised

to obey the laws of Mexico, embrace the Catholic religion, and bend the ear of the right government official. In 1839, Hugo Reid, native of Scotland, Cambridge graduate, veteran of several years of trade in South America, newly naturalized Mexican citizen and Catholic, husband of the beautiful Mission Indian, Victoria, adoptive father of Victoria's four Indian children, pioneer anthropologist who later recorded primary information on the rapidly dying Gabrielino Indian culture, in short, a versatile and ambitious adventurer, applied for and two years later received provisional title to the 13,316-acre Rancho Santa Anita.

To verify his intentions, Don Perfecto, as he was called, began construction of a ranchhouse, "flat roof'd and corridor'd," in the typical Los Angeles style. Hand-made, sun-dried adobe brick walls, and a roof smeared with brea (from the tar pits of the Pueblo) to keep out the rains, constituted visible evidence of intent to settle. Though the Reids continued to live in their more pretentious San Gabriel home (Uva Espina), there were frequent visits and visitors to Rancho Santa Anita.

The gracious hospitality found throughout California during the rancho period was equally evident at Santa Anita. Reid's wife, Victoria, a successful product of the mission theory of total conversion, was a model of Castilian gentility. Visitors were "surprised and delighted with the excellence and neatness of the housekeeping of the Indian wife, which could not have been excelled."

Readers today are often equally "surprised and delighted" to discover the epicurean paradise that could be found in rancho life. Guests at Santa Anita recorded, "We feasted daily on good food. For breakfast we had honey (the production of the land, and in fact everything we ate was), fresh eggs from the poultry yard . . . coffee, with rich cream; choco-

late and tea; 'chino beans' (curley beans) . . . tortillas made of flour or corn; but no butter, strange to say, with hundreds of cows on the place, but however this was characteristic of the ranchos at that season of the year." The midday meal of "beef steak with or without onions, broiled beef, stewed chickens, or hash made of carne seca (dried beef) with scrambled eggs mixed, seasoned with onions, tomatoes, and a sprinkling of red pepper, beans prepared with plenty of gravy . . . homemade bread, California wine, and finished with black coffee" was surely enough to loosen the belt of the hardest working *ranchero*. Still to come, though, was dinner "of chicken soup, roast ducks, *guisado de carne* richly flavored, sweet potatoes grown on the land, *frijoles*, chicken salad, and lettuce. This fine dinner was served with old wine of the make of the Mission of San Gabriel, and custard and pies and coffee." Harris Newmark, one of the lucky visitors, justly concluded that "The hospitality shown to McKinley and myself, not only by Reid himself but by his Indian wife, was sumptuous. A Castilian lady of standing could not have bestowed on us any greater attention or graciousness than was extended to us as I have described at the 'Santa Anita'."

In his role as a working *ranchero*, Don Perfecto sought to further strengthen his land-grant petition and noted, "I have sown 10 fanegas of wheat—cleared ground to put in a vineyard of 10,000 vines and 1,000 fruit trees. I have put on the farm . . . 62 mares and in April intend putting on my stock of cattle."

The cattle stock, almost without exception, was the staple of the rancho economy, even on a rich agricultural ranch as the Santa Anita, and the annual "*matanza*" (steer slaughtering) provided a first-hand lesson in *ranchero* economics. From July through September, some fifty

to one hundred (at a time) of a rancho's fattest steers were butchered to produce fifty to one hundred "California leather dollars" (hides), seventy-five to one hundred pounds of interior tallow for shipment, forty to fifty pounds of higher grade surface tallow ("*manteca*") for domestic cooking purposes, and some two hundred pounds of beef, cured and dried for local consumption. Hides and tallow, carefully prepared for shipment, became rancho currency, used in trade with foreign shippers to obtain household and manufactured items not available in the dusty pueblo stores, while the still meaty carcasses, stripped of their "cash value," were left to spoil in the sun, banquets for buzzards.

The rancho period in California's story has been commonly acknowledged as one of pastoral simplicity. Rich in land and cattle, sustained by a strong economic system, and secure in a remarkable absence of theft and banditry, California was a provincial Garden of Eden. Not until the discovery of gold and the rapid influx of "Americans" was the *ranchero* unduly disturbed by the world beyond his boundaries. Lured to the gold fields and caught up in the new demand for meat from the burgeoning mining districts and gold-rush cities, the *ranchero* abandoned the hide and tallow trade for the more lucrative sale of beef. Gone—in a puff of gold fever, new statehood, and a Land Commission suddenly responsible for allowing or disallowing Spanish and Mexican land grants—was the simple, undemanding life of the rancho. The reins of pacesetter were handed over to the new California phenomenon, the American businessman.

Sandy Snider is an assistant in the historical section at the Arboretum currently engaged in a research project on the life and times of the Gabrielino Indians.



Snider, Sandy. 1975. "The Ranchero." *Lasca leaves* 25, 77–80.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/130958>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/140976>

Holding Institution

Missouri Botanical Garden, Peter H. Raven Library

Sponsored by

Los Angeles Arboretum

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder.

Rights Holder: The Arboretum Library at the Los Angeles County Arboretum and Botanic Garden

License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Rights: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.