

A mid 1830s ride could be just plain dangerous

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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First Spanish missionaries and later Spanish landowners such as the Vaca, Pena and Armijo families acquired vast acreage of Northern California land to raise cattle, namely black steers.

By the mid-1830s, the 21 California missions owned more than 400,000 head of cattle between them. Most of the animals were not grown for their meat, but rather for their hides and tallow.

Currency was in short supply, and hides became one of the main trading items. Contracts of the time list the number of hides needed for a purchase, or judges fined a delinquent with a fee to be paid in hides.

Hides were used to create everything from saddles to horse blankets, clothing to bed mattresses, or window and door coverings.

Tallow came in two varieties: the better grade, called manteca, was used for cooking, while the sebo was transformed into tallow candles and soap.

The missions trained Indian workers in the various methods to tan and preserve the hides.

One method used was to soak the hides in saltwater for up to 48 hours. This softened the skin and allowed the workers to scrape off meat, hair and other decomposable remnants. The cleaned hides then were stretched and dried before being stacked into bundles for transport.

The first Anglo-American settlers also engaged in the profitable cattle business. In Solano County, John Wolfskill and Dr. Sylvester Woodbridge owned large cattle herds.

The steers roamed freely over the grassland, their ownership declared through the brands on their hides. These brands were also stamped onto pieces of tanned leather, together with the owner's name, and then registered at the county seat.

Luzena Stanley Wilson vividly described in her memoirs "49ers" her first excursion across the rolling Solano landscape to visit her Wolfskill neighbors.

"After I had been about six months in Vaca Valley," she wrote of her first summer in the area in 1851, "I concluded to ride over (the 12 miles to see Mr. John Wolfskill) and get acquainted. So one morning bright and early, after the breakfast was over, the dishes washed, and the housework finished, I saddled my horse with my husbands saddle (a side saddle was unknown in those parts), packed a lunch, took a bottle of water, tied my two boys on behind me with a stout rope and started off. I did not know the exact spot where my neighbors lived, but felt sure of finding them without trouble, as I had only to ride across the plain until I struck the first stream, and follow it down. There were no roads, so I could select my path as I pleased, taking care only to avoid as much as possible the bands of Spanish cattle which covered the whole country; they were dangerous to encounter, even mounted, and to anyone on foot they were certain death".

The cattle were essentially wild and easily spooked or frightened. Despite Luzena's precautions, she was unable to avoid the roaming animals.

"We were riding rapidly through the scattered herds, when a sudden gust of wind took away the hat of one of the children, and as a hat was something precious and not easily procured at that time, we must stop and get it. I should hardly have been able to descend and remount without attracting the notice of the cattle by the fluttering of my dress, and then a stampede would inevitably have followed; so I constructed a stirrup of handkerchiefs; then my little boy clambered down and climbed up again, in the face of the tossing heads, red eyes and spreading horns all about us."

Within the next couple of decades, the cattle industry underwent drastic changes.

I will continue my story in my next column.

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