

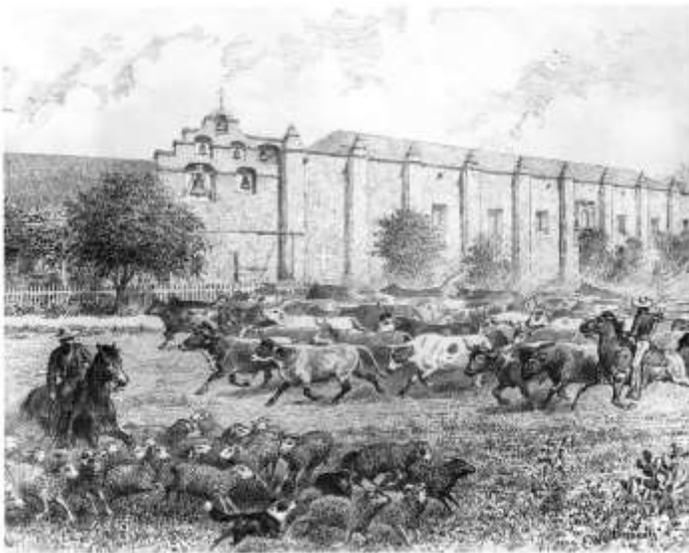
## GRADE LEVEL READER

### Mexican-era California's Cattle Hide and Tallow Trade

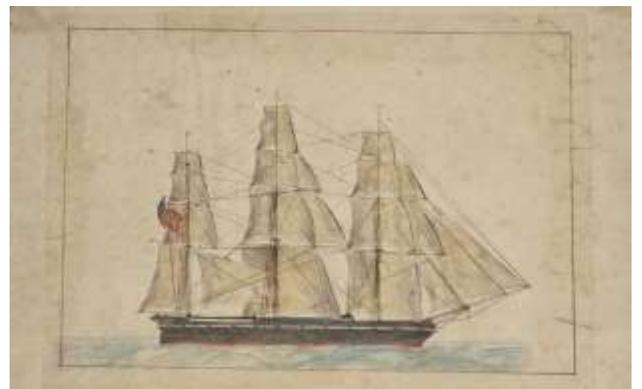
Before the Spanish arrived in California, Indian groups had their own way of life. Some of the things they ate were acorns and salmon. They had complex practices to keep fruits, nuts, seeds and grasses growing in abundance. About one-hundred different languages were spoken by the various groups. There were no cattle, horses or sheep.

The Spanish founders of the California Missions brought cattle, horses and sheep with them and started the hide and tallow trade. This means that the labor of the California Indians was used to raise cattle and then later the hides and tallow were sold. This engraving of the San Gabriel Mission hints at the thousands of cattle that lived on mission land.

Foreign merchants arrived in Alta California ports by ship. Most of them were from Boston. They bought the cattle hides, going up and down the coast in their ships for over or two years. They wanted to collect as many hides as they could. The merchants returned to the East Coast sailing around Cape Horn. The ships took as many as 30,000-40,000 hides at a time. These California hides were used to make things like shoes, boots, saddles, furniture and industrial belts.



Emanuel Wyttenbach *Line engraving*, late 19<sup>th</sup> c.



Original drawing of the 1828 hide and tallow ship from Boston, the *Brookline*  
From Alfred Robinson's Logbook

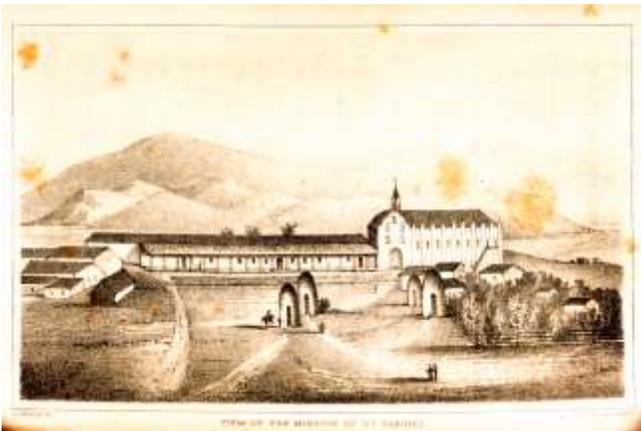
The fat of the cattle was melted down in large vats and then used to make soap and candles. This product is called tallow. This drawing from about 1848 is one of the only drawings of producing tallow in early California.<sup>1</sup>

Cattle horns were used to make buttons. Their weight was also used to make the bottom of a ship steady and secure (ballast).



William Rich Hutton, *Trying out Tallow*, Monterey, c. 1848

Ferdinand Deppe's oil painting, Alfred Robinson's drawing, and the line engraving above show peaceful scenes at Mission San Gabriel. However, historians know that life during the time of the missions was very difficult for California's Indians. Cattle grazing disrupted their food supplies. European explorers brought diseases that greatly reduced their populations. To deal with these hardships, native peoples often combined their previous religious beliefs and practices with the Spanish and then Mexican Catholic Churches.



Alfred Robinson, *View of the Mission St. Gabriel*  
From *Life in California*, 1846



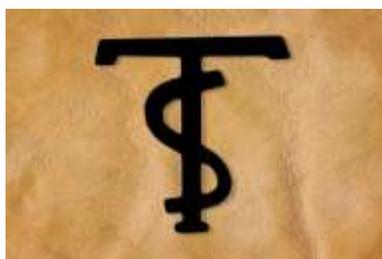
Ferdinand Deppe, *San Gabriel Mission*, oil on canvas, c.1832

<sup>1</sup> William Rich Hutton, "Trying Out Tallow," Monterey

Many Indians living at the missions had to adapt to Spanish ranching culture. They brought knowledge and skills from their own culture and became known as *vaqueros*. They managed cattle on horseback. They were the first “cowboys” in California.<sup>2</sup>

Ferdinand Deppe’s painting shows a foreign, hide and tallow trader in white pants and a blue jacket. Can you find him? He is talking to the head of the mission. Though there would have been thousands of cattle, Deppe’s painting has only one steer! Because of this hide and tallow trade, you will often see cattle hides or cattle branding symbols if you visit a California mission today.

Mexican-era California was a time of changes and challenges. Many of these changes and challenges happened at the missions.



Branding symbols from Mission San Gabriel,  
Mission San Juan Capistrano



Cattle hide hanging at the  
Mission San Juan Capistrano

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<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).