

*TESTIMONIOS: Early California through the
Eyes of Women, 1815–1848*

TRANSLATED WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY
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The authors translated interviews of thirteen women done in the nineteenth century that provide historians of California with a gendered window into Mexican society and law. The periodization is important because far too much of our knowledge of early California is burdened with class and culture. Further, the authors point out that the documents were “marred by actual mistranslations.” In returning to the original transcripts of the interviews, the authors found “that sentences, even entire paragraphs, of the women’s words have been left out of some English translations” (p. xxxi). The authors have translated from the original interviews and, most importantly, given readers a precise explanation of the methodology of the interviewers and their personal

histories. Clearly, cultural bias had infiltrated the process in the nineteenth century.

What was on the minds of these women? Crime was a significant aspect of life. Rosalía de Leese remembered on June 27, 1874, “Frémont and his ring of thieves were in Sonoma, robberies were very common” (p. 29). Teresa de la Guerra de Hartnell reflected on March 12, 1875 that the Americans were not the only enemy deviants; Mexican “governors and officials . . . were men of very bad principles . . . very bad individuals . . . cowards and bad people” (p. 62). Catarina Avila de Ríos remembered on June 20, 1877, “three or four Irishmen . . . murdered the children with the hatchet while they were sleeping . . . and killed a black man who worked as a cook” (pp. 90-1). Angustias de la Guerra told Thomas Savage in 1878 that around 1829 “a ship from Mexico arrived in Santa Bárbara with two hundred or more men. All of them were convicts and the majority of them had committed very serious crimes” (p. 213). She also thought Mexican “soldiers were consummate thieves who committed all sorts of crimes every day” (p. 259).

Women also reflected upon land titles. Dorotea Valdez of Monterey on June 27, 1874 looked to the future, saying that “as soon as the railroad begins to operate, many foreigners will come to settle here. Rest assured, that is when Señor Jacks will receive the punishment he deserves. All we want is for some clever lawyer to take the pueblo land away from him” (p. 38). The Mexicans of Monterey were convinced that David Jacks had stolen their pueblo lands from them. Valdez gave a reason: “This is land that nobody had the right to give away, because it rightfully belongs to every man, woman, and child who was born in our town” (p. 38). Jacks had constructed fences to keep Mexican cattle and horses off his land and was “a natural-born enemy” (p. 38). Linda Heidenreich’s *This Land Was Mexican Once: Histories of Resistance from Northern California* (2007) recounted similar tales of stolen lands, mostly in Napa. Rosaura Sanchez’s *Telling Identities: The California Testimonios* (1995) gave the oral histories gendered, ideological, and protonational interpretations. As we know from Gordon Morris Bakken’s *The Development of Law in Frontier California: Civil Law and Society, 1850–1890* (1985) David Jacks successfully defended his title and encroachments on his pueblo lands.

The bulk of remembrances regarding land focused on American lawyers, bankers, and squatters stealing Mexican land. Yet María Antonia Rodríguez saw it in a world history context. “[S]he replied that though the Americans had taken away from her nearly the whole of her lands, she had no grudge against them — for, she said, ‘It is the law of nature that the poor should steal from the rich. We Californians in 1846 owned every inch of soil in this country, and our conquerors took away from us the greater part. The same thing, I suppose, has happened over and over again in every conquered nation’” (pp. 45-6). She was not a victim as so many others remembered themselves.

This volume is an outstanding contribution to California legal history, providing researchers with correctly translated oral histories. The authors must be commended for taking on such a daunting task.

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