



Fall 1987

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Recommended Citation

Paul B. Sears, *Las Carneradas Sheep Trade in New Mexico 1700-1860*, 27 Nat. Resources J. 953 (1987). Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol27/iss4/23>

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LAS CARNERADAS

SHEEP TRADE IN NEW MEXICO 1700–1860

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New Mexico Historical Society Cooperating:

Published by New Mexico University Press. Pp. x, 197. 1987.

The taste for mutton may be debatable, but its importance as a source of protein during more than three centuries of costly struggle by Spain for control of an American Empire is clear. *Carneradas* means flocks of sheep. These came to number thousands in size little more than a century after the conquest of Mexico in 1519.

When people move into new environments, they usually try to take enough of the old to ensure their survival. It had long been clear that in the Mediterranean region *ganados minor*—sheep and goats—were better than larger cattle that thrive in cooler and moister climates. So the Spaniards brought the animals to which they were accustomed.

They also brought the kinds of personnel they thought most necessary—soldiers, clergy, administrators from viceroy to clerk—but for labor they counted on the landless, including slaves, both Indian and Negro when possible. There was not much inducement for experienced farm families to risk pioneer life and there doubtless were the inevitable adventurers with their keen eye on the main chance. The one thing in common for this assortment was the need of food.

Their vegetable diet consisted of maize, beans, squash, etc. which were adopted from the Native American diet. Sheep and goats were the obvious source of animal protein; those who had then found it easy to get the land on which to pasture these animals. The demand for mutton and later for wool extended south, to the cities and mines of Mexico and outward to the posts needed to protect the frontiers from raiding Indians and less than neighborly neighboring nations, the French and English colonies.

The resulting social structure was one of great *haciendas* and their dependants who performed the necessary labor. Their owners were as varied as those listed in a preceding paragraph, including the Franciscans who are given credit for their fair and humane treatment of their employees. From some of the other *haciendados* came a pattern of relationship that has persisted, causing eventual trouble and justifying the comment of an American soldier “the victim on both sides of the border is the *peon*.”

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