

*Haciendas in Mexico*¹

Many of the haciendas are of very great extent; it is estimated that 300 of them contain at least 25,000 acres each...The Mexican hacienda seldom contains less than 2,500 acres--whether situated on the arid plains of the north, where land is worth little or nothing, or in the densely settled areas of the Mesa Central. The haciendas are settlements complete in themselves. Indeed, few of these estates have less than a hundred, while many of them have as many as a thousand inhabitants. . . Furthermore, the haciendas are all named; they appear on the maps; and they are important units of public administration, often being incorporated as *municipios*. They include all the customary accessories of an independent community, such as a church, a store, a post office, a burying ground, and sometimes a school or hospital. Workshops are maintained, not only for the repair but even for the manufacture of machinery and of the numerous implements on the estate. The permanent population consists of an *administrador*, one or more majordomos, a group of foremen, and the regular peons, together with the families of these individuals. Besides these, there are several classes of hangers-on, less permanently attached to the farm. Among the latter are usually a priest or two, clerks, accountants, storekeepers, hired shepherds and cattlemen, and often a number of families who rent small pieces of land from the hacienda. Over this aggregation the owner presides in a more or less patriarchal manner, the degree of paternal care or of tyranny varying with the character of the individual and with that of his superior employees. The typical Mexican landowner spends relatively little of his time within this citadel [his house]. He usually maintains a residence in the capital or some other large city, where he spends the greater part of the year. If the income of his property makes it possible, he may go to Europe or the United States. Only during the most active seasons--planting or harvesting--does he long remain on his estate....

The laborers on the haciendas, in most parts of Mexico, are of Indian blood or are mestizos in whom the Indian element predominates. . . The peons upon a Mexican hacienda are theoretically free...As a matter of fact, however, many of them are held upon the estate in bondage no less real because it is sanctioned only by custom and enforced only by economic conditions. . . By a system of advance payments, which the peons are totally unable to refund, the *hacendados* are able to keep them permanently under financial obligations and hence to oblige them to remain upon the estates to which they belonged. . . The daily wages paid to the peons who work on the haciendas have always been very low....seldom paid in money. Ordinarily for his labor he is given a due bill or time check to be negotiated at the store maintained by the hacienda--with obvious results. On the other hand, the actual wage earned is not the only compensation that the peon receives. Certain perquisites, if one might so describe them, have been established by custom, which alleviate the lot of the Indian laborer. Thus he occupies a hut upon the estate without being called upon to pay rent. He is usually allowed a *milpa*, a piece of land for his own use, and this may provide at least a part of his living. Moreover, while he is forced to resort to the hacienda store, he enjoys a credit there sufficient to tide him over in the event of a general crop failure. Actually, however, so meager is the compensation received by the peon that he is kept in the most abject poverty, and few opportunities of escape from the bondage imposed by the established system ever present themselves. Obviously, this situation has greatly encouraged the emigration of rural laborers from Mexico to the southwestern part of the United States.

1 From George M. McBride: *Haciendas, from The Land Systems of Mexico* (1923), taken from the Modern History Sourcebook website.