

# Hide and Tallow Production



## HIDE AND TALLOW TRADE

Mission San Juan Capistrano, like all of the twenty-one missions in California raised cattle for the purpose of trade. The Spanish Padres relied upon two goods to trade and barter with, hides (cow skin) and tallow (melted fat). Missions traded hides and tallow in exchange for iron, metal, tobacco, rope, clothing, and even chocolate.

During the Mission period, (1769-1821) hides and tallow were traded only within the Spanish Empire. After Mexico won its independence in 1821, trade restrictions were lifted. No longer were the people of California limited to trading with just Spanish ships. American and English traders sailed up the coast of California to trade their luxury goods for cowhides and tallow. Boston merchants were especially interested in acquiring hides for leather shoe production in New England factories, and tallow for soap and candle production.

By the 1830s, Boston traders had given cowhides a nickname "California Banknotes." Hides so to speak were Californio's (California Ranchers) "money." Between 1831-1836 over 300,000 hides were shipped out of California. Californios prospered throughout this period.

## COWHIDE TANNING PROCESS

Tanning simply defined is the process by which the hide or skin of an animal is cured through the removal of the flesh, fat, moisture and bacteria that cause decay; thereby converting the hide or skin into a stable, pliable material called leather.

**During the Mission period, the following would be done to tan hides:**

1. The hide would be washed and soaked in clear water to remove the salt, then soaked in a solution of lime and water for three or four days to soften the hide and loosen the hair.

2. A knife was used to scrape off the hair.
3. The hides were placed in vats, where they were soaked in a tanning solution. The solution was usually acidic. Native American tanners would often make the acidic solution by straining water through cow brains, oak bark, and acorns.
4. After soaking in the pits over a few months, the hides were again washed rubbed, stretched and beaten up with grease and tallow to soften them.
5. They were hung to dry.
6. Once dry and beaten, the leather would be ready to use.

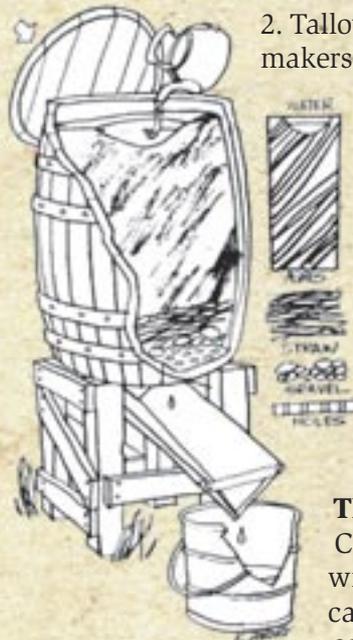


## LEATHER PRODUCTS

Native American skilled leather artisans made sandals, boots, saddles, bridles, lariats, furniture, and beds with leather products.

## TALLOW RENDERING PROCESS

1. After butchering the cow, tallow workers melted the fat in large metal pots. Once the cow fat melted, membranes and beef pieces were strained out. After cooling, candles were made by either dipping wicks into the lukewarm tallow or pouring it into molds.



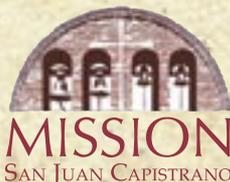
2. Tallow soap required a bit more work. Soap makers mixed tallow with lye (water/ash solution). Straw was placed on the bottom of the barrel, ash was added, and finally water. The water would strain through the ash and straw. The solution that filtered through was known as lye.

3. Mixing tallow and lye makes soap. Mission soap was harsh and did not smell very good, however, it worked for most cleaning purposes.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TALLOW

Can you imagine living in a world without electricity? In the early 1800s, candles and oil lamps were the only source of light after dark!

Imagine living at the Mission in the year 1801. You would have been one of a thousand people living and working at the Mission. The high numbers of Mission Native Americans required hundreds of candles to be made and used each day!



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