INTRODUCTION

The importance of the hacienda has been admirably expressed by Jacques Lambert, who states, "Nothing has had a more widespread and lasting effect on Latin America's social and political history than the large estate."[1] This is certainly the case for Mexico, a country that was dominated for four hundred years by the landed estate, whose most significant form was the *latifundio*, a holding usually composed of two or more haciendas. Yet our knowledge of the hacienda is woefully inadequate. As Charles Gibson points out, we lack not only information but also a secure conceptual frame. He adds, "My own feeling is that the hacienda is a crucial institution, that for various reasons its study has been slighted, and that we would be well advised to make a concerted effort toward solving the historical problems that it raises."[2]

Fortunately, an encouraging beginning toward solving these problems has been made by Gibson himself and especially by François Chevalier, whose classic work on colonial Mexico will long remain the standard against which other hacienda studies are measured.[3] And a growing number of scholars are making significant contributions toward illuminating various aspects of the hacienda.[4] But perhaps, as has recently been suggested, the time has come to abandon the term *hacienda studies* altogether, on the ground that it is too restrictive.[5]

In addition to approaching the topic from such standpoints as labor systems or regional variations, we must examine the interaction between the activities of the landowners—the *hacendados*—and the evolution of the hacienda itself.

In this connection, J. H. Hexter's comments about the English landed aristocracy would appear equally valid for Mexico: "It seems to me that if we were to examine the story of the overmighty subject we might learn a great deal about the way the English magnate transformed his landed wealth into power by successive adaptations to emergent circumstances. . . . When we seek what underlay the excessive power wielded by these overmighty subjects we discover that it was in all cases similar: all of them used their lands as a base from which to move to a position of command or control over men."[6] In Mexico, because many estates were really owned by families rather than by individuals, the approach suggested by Hexter might better be applied to the "overmighty family," that is, to the "wealthy and powerful family blocks whose members aid and abet each other in both business and politics."[7]

Such a study is made possible by the Sánchez Navarro papers, located at the University of Texas at Austin. This magnificent archive —the largest collection of hacienda materials in the United States— comprises some 75,000 pages of manuscripts spanning the period from 1658 to 1895. Not only is there a detailed calendar, but the papers also include personal letters, business correspondence, hacienda reports and inventories, wills, land titles, and court records.[8]

As in my two previous studies of this family, the present work employs a topical approach.[9] While this approach necessarily involves a certain amount of repetition, the scope and complexity of the Sánchez Navarros' affairs preclude a strictly chronological treatment. A topical framework permits a detailed analysis of how the family built up and operated their estates and of how they exercised their resultant economic, social, and political power. The geographical and chronological boundaries of this study permit analysis of both continuity and change in Mexico's evolving socioeconomic structure during one of the most decisive periods in her history—the era of transition from colony to nation.

The case study of the Sánchez Navarros calls into question many of the earlier generalizations made about the Mexican hacienda, such as the assertion that haciendas were "only in a limited way subject to the rules of economic enterprise, management for profit, and sale for gain. They were held because of family tradition, as means of social prestige, and managed with as little risk as possible."[10] The Sánchez Navarros simply do not conform to this stereotype. They were motivated by more practical considerations than prestige and tradition. The point is an important one, for the Sánchez Navarros were not merely another elite landowning family: in less than a century this remarkable clan amassed a domain approaching the size of Portugal. Their *latifundio* was the largest ever to have existed not only in Mexico but also in all of Latin America.

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