

## Land Tenure in the Llanos of Venezuela

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Two motives drove the Spaniards to exploration and conquest in the New World: the quest for gold, and the desire to add new members to the Roman Catholic Church. Hence those regions conquered by the Spaniards were divided up into great landed estates (*encomiendas*) and given to the most illustrious for two generations (*por dos vidas*). The Indians living on the land at the time became serfs, forced to work for their white masters, who were to indoctrinate them with Christianity. This led to all sorts of abuses. The goal of all those possessing such a grant was to squeeze as much as possible out of the Indians in the form of labor before both they and the land reverted to the Crown. But very frequently estates did not return to the Crown at the end of two generations. Indeed, many of them still exist intact, controlled by lineal descendants of the *Conquistadores*.

*Economiendas* were sometimes made to a man about to lead an expedition into a region not yet explored. Such was the case in the Llanos of Apure and Zamora. Captain Ochogavia requested many rights and privileges in return for acting as leader of an exploration party on the Apure River. Some of the more important requests were:

That in the river port to be founded, a custom house be established, a certain percentage of the receipts to go to the Captain and his heirs for three generations;

That of the Indians subdued, the Captain should have one-fourth of them "*en encomienda por tres vidas*," and that he should dispose of the others as he saw fit;

That he be mayor of one or two towns that might be founded.

In return for these privileges he would complete the exploration within one year, and bear all the costs. His requests were duly complied with by the *Audiencia de Santa Fe de Bogota*. It is to be noted that he demanded these privileges for three generations, rather than two. Thus the feudal system was transferred to the New World. Indians at first supplied the labor on the estates, but in many areas negro slaves were imported in great numbers—particularly to ranches or plantations on the lowlands.

Boundary lines of the great ranches on the plains are notoriously vague. The estates are never fenced in, and are frequently so vast that the cattle on them become almost as shy as wild animals. Such an estate may be bounded by a river or other natural landmarks, or by a purely arbitrary line. Such vagueness has given rise to many difficulties. For instance, a grant of eight square leagues between two rivers may, when surveyed, be much larger, yet the holder of the grant feels entitled to it because of the boundaries specified. If there are less than eight square leagues between the rivers he insists that he has a right to more land beyond the natural boundaries.

The series of revolutions has meant a lack of progress on the Llanos. The solitary rancher was powerless against the marauding bands which have scoured the plains from time to time since the wars of independence. The plainsmen are naturally reluctant to establish ranches and to build up great herds if some unprincipled individual—*persona grata* to the political clique in power—might appropriate them in time of peace, or some revolutionary faction do the same during a political upheaval.