Big picture under a big sky| Hispanic influences in the Northern Rockies

William J. VandenBos
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A BIG PICTURE UNDER A BIG SKY:
HISPANIC INFLUENCES IN THE NORTHERN ROCKIES

by

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B. A., Montana State University, 1982

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts in Spanish

The University of Montana

1995

Approved by

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A Big Picture under a Big Sky: Hispanic Influences in the Northern Rockies

Director: Dr. Anthony Beltramo

This paper addresses the following question. What remnants of Hispanic influence in the Northern Rockies can be found today, and what are their antecedents? The methodology used largely consisted of library research; some material was obtained through personal interview.

The paper is broken into five chapters; the first four examine specific historical and linguistic topics and the fifth comments on the similarities between the American cowboy and the Spanish conquistador.

The evolution of the horse as well as its Spanish roots are examined in the first chapter. The return of the horse to the Americas and its historical impact are also discussed.

The second chapter deals with the phenomenon of cattle in the Americas, and particularly focuses on the Longhorn breed. Historical material surrounding its importation are presented.

The historical evolution of the cattle tenders that became known as cowboys and vaqueros is examined in the third chapter. The common and disparate roots of each culture are presented.

Linguistic and historical information on the evolution of the gear and techniques used by cowboys and vaqueros is presented in chapter four. Included in specific information on the clothing and tools used as well as the horse tack involved.

In addition, at the end of each of these four chapters, educational materials are provided for teachers who would seek ways to introduce and/or develop these topics in their classrooms.

The paper concludes that Hispanic influence is present in the Northern Rockies largely in the horse and cattle cultures as a result of historical movement of those cultures from the southern United States and Mexico.
In 1866 a young Texas cowman and entrepreneur named Nelson Story, aided by a motley group of Texas cowboys and Mexican vaqueros, gathered up a herd of Longhorn cattle and drove them north to Montana territory. Acting against the express wishes of the federal government and risking his life by violating the territory of numerous Indian tribes, Story brought his herd of beef to the hungry miners at Alder Gulch and Virginia City. He was rewarded by a phenomenal return on his money and the beginnings of a land and cattle empire that still exists today.

The movement of cattle from Texas to Montana that he began and that culminated with the huge cattle drives of the 1870’s and 1880’s had a tremendous impact on the landscape and culture that we see when we look at Montana today. Cowboys—both dimestore and genuine—can be found from Missoula to Miles City and at all points in between. The horse-and-cattle culture that they symbolize re-
mains, even in the face of stunning changes in Montana and the American West, as one of the primary ways that we characterize both ourselves and our economy. The existence of the cowboy is as inextricably woven into the fabric of Montana’s history as the extermination of the bison, the decimation of Indian tribes, and the coming of fences and towns.

As a teacher of the Spanish language as well as the literature of the American West, I became intrigued by the obviously Hispanic origin of much of the terminology associated with the world of horses and cowboys. I wanted to know how the language of a country some two thousand miles to the south came to have such an impact on an isolated area like the Northern Rockies. It wasn’t long until I found the accounts of Nelson Story and others like him who, besides trailing cows to Montana, also drove linguistic influence far north of its cultural boundaries.

In addition, and not surprisingly in retrospect, I found that Spanish terms had their own histories. For example, a word like *hackamore* can be fully explained only by understanding the Arabian influence on the Iberian peninsula. It has become clear to me that words that are part of the Montana cowboy’s lexicon today are directly related to events that took place literally centuries and continents away.

Throughout the course of my research I have been continually amazed at the complexity of history and I have found that isolating the Spanish influence has left me with less-than-satisfying answers as to how the West came to be what it is today. I found that more satisfactory answers tried to deal with the complexities and larger contexts as well as the particulars that are Spanish in nature. The question I am striving to answer in this enquiry then can best be summed up as follows: What remnants of Spanish influence in the Northern Rockies can be found today, and what are their antecedents?

Some answers have a relatively shorter historical view and treat cowhands and
their livelihood. Other questions require more comprehensive answers, and like the history of the hackamore, go back to earlier beginnings. In writing the chapter on the story of horses, for example, I have found the most satisfactory answers involve looking at the very beginnings of a species whose existence has profoundly influenced human history. In the final chapter I move away from the historical and linguistic emphases of the paper to speculate briefly on two groups of men that I found fascinating in my research. Seldom thought of in the same context, Spanish conquistadors and American cowboys share some intriguing commonalities.

Another point needs to be addressed here. One impetus for this paper has been my desire as a teacher to be able to demonstrate to my Spanish students in particular the fact that the language they study has meaning even in the linguistic isolation of Manhattan, Montana. The rich heritage of the Spanish language and its obvious relationship to the world of horses and cattle provide a meaningful entry point to this concept for many of them.

In writing this paper I have learned a lot for myself; as a teacher I need to pass it on. To this end I have done the following. For each of the first four chapters, those that are historical and linguistic in emphasis, I have provided three accompaniments to the text. Each chapter has a companion story as well as a brief crossword puzzle, either or both of which can serve as entry points or enrichments for discussions involving the particulars of the subject matter at hand. In addition, a list sources for further reading as well as some suggested areas of enquiry are provided. As a secondary teacher I have learned that preparation for the "teachable moment" is crucial. These tools will provide entry points into material about which I now have some limited expertise.

When the cowboys and vaqueros of the later portion of the nineteenth century
navigated the Great Plains and brought the Texas Longhorn to the rich pasturage of buffalo grass in Montana territory, they most certainly had no idea of the linguistic wake they were trailing. Through this enquiry I have come to appreciate the various strands of history that have been woven into our American West. It is my hope that this project, which has elucidated so much for me, can do the same for my students.
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Chapter One

HORSES IN HISTORY

Depending on whom one reads, the beginnings of the horse can go back nearly sixty million years, give or take ten million or so. Even the most historically inept among us will recall that the “Age of the Dinosaurs” is believed to have ended rather mysteriously about sixty-five million years ago in some much-hypothesized change in the Earth and its environment. One thing that most agree upon is that from that time on the surface of the earth was beginning to become drier and the conditions for mammalian life became steadily more favorable.

As shown in the fossil record, the first “horse” was hardly recognizable as such. Some twelve inches high, not much different in size than a lap dog, the Hyracotherium resembled a shrew more than a horse. Yet this animal was present in Europe and North America (where it is called Eohippus, or “dawn horse”). It featured a pointed nose, a stooped neck, and a heavy nail at the end of each of its multi-toed legs. This creature is understood to be a forerunner of the modern horse (figure 1).

By some thirty million years ago this creature (called the Miohippus in America and the Mesohippus in Europe) had grown to the size of a sheep, and its head and neck had elongated to take greater advantage of the grazing grasses which were developing. The multi-toed aspect of the animal was becoming less significant as the middle toe, with the hardened beginnings of a hoof, began to predominate. The creature also began to run, and run fleetly, thus enabling his escape from emerging
predators like the wolves and big cats.

The next ten million years were marked by great changes on the face of the earth. The area that had been the bottom of a warm inland sea became the Rocky Mountains through cataclysmic upheavals. Other great mountain ranges like the Himalayas and Alps were formed. And the Mesohippus disappeared from Europe, although its American counterpart continued to thrive. By some twenty million years ago this animal had grown to about three feet high at the withers, about the size of a pony. Its lower legs had elongated, allowing it to run faster. The hooves had became recognizable and the teeth had hardened due to the diet of grasses it fed on. The horse was becoming recognizable as such, as it grew bigger and stronger in all ways. This evolution continued apace and the horse of the Americas is believed to have migrated from North America to various points around the globe—South America, Asia, and Europe.

Such was the state of affairs with what is now called Equus Caballus up to a significant point in relatively recent times. By 10,000 years ago, for reasons no one knows, the wild horse of the Americas had completely disappeared. Thus when human beings crossed the land bridge to North America, there were few or no horses recognizable as such to be found. The horse would not be seen in the Americas until Christopher Columbus unloaded his cargo on his second trip to the New World in 1494. This I'll discuss later.

First though, it should be noted that Equus Caballus had developed into a number of species, only a few of which are extant today. The remains of the truly wild (as opposed to feral) horses are to be found in the the various zebras, wild asses, and Mongolian wild horses. These Mongolian wild horses are also called Equus Przewalsky after the Russian explorer who discovered herds of these horses in Mongolia in the late nineteenth century. This species can be seen in zoos around the world, where it has apparently adapted well to captivity. The remaining horses of the world today are the result of centuries of domestication and selective (and
not-so-selective) breeding. In no other species, excepting perhaps dogs, is the influence of humanity so deeply etched.

PEOPLE MEET HORSES

No one really knows when and how people and horses first began to be aware of each other, but it does seem to be clear that horses were first utilized by humans as a food source. Primitive man ran herds of horses over cliffs in Europe and Asia much as the Native American hunted buffalo before the coming of the horse. At one site in France the skeletal remains of 100,000 horses were exhumed at the base of a "run." Scenes depicting the hunting of horses in this manner can be found in the caves at Lascaux and Altamira, as well as caves in Northern Africa.

While early hunters were able to approach some of the larger prey of their time on foot, it remained difficult to get within spearing or clubbing distance of the fleet horse. The Cro Magnon, with his primitive spear-thrower and later the bow and arrow, made the horse a more probable target. However, a much greater destiny was in store for the relationship of horses and mankind.

Human beings are generally believed to have begun domesticating small animals like sheep and goats some fifteen to twenty thousand years ago. Perhaps later but sometimes concomitantly, other animals like pigs and cows were domesticated. While this domestication was going on the cultivation and irrigation of cereal grains was also taking place. From the records of the early Sumerians and Egyptians we can see how writing, in the form of record keeping for agriculture, got some early beginnings. By the time of this early writing the horse was well domesticated, used primarily as a beast of burden, but perhaps also to carry riders. At
any rate, it seems probable that the initial domestication of the horse took place sometime after smaller, more easily caught and handled animals came under man's rule.

Some say the Chinese were the first horsemen, others say the Brahmans of India; yet others insist the first riders were the nomads of Western Asia. From what I've read it seems likely that the horse was domesticated at various places on the globe at roughly the same time, give or take a few thousand years. The point is that people have been riding horses and using the awesome increase in power that the beast provided for millennia. And once humanity found itself on the back of a horse the world began to change, and change much more quickly than ever before.

While it is really not within the scope of this paper to trace the entire history of the impact the horse has had on human history, it is none the less interesting to note that prior to the return of the horse to the Americas by the Spaniards the use of the animal was central to many pivotal events. We can start with the invention of the wheel, which led almost immediately to the wheeled cart. The invention of the war chariot, really just a streamlined and modified cart initially, brought an awesome weapon into the hands of the Sumerians and the Egyptians. Imagine the terror soldiers on foot felt as these engines of war galloped toward them. Mounted legions of soldiers played key roles in the conquests and reconquests of Europe and Asia. We don't picture Genghis Khan on foot—he was a horseman. Alexander the Great conquered vast amounts of territory from the back of Bucephalus, one of the first horses who actually left his name in history. The Crusaders came out of Europe mounted on the heavily-boned horses that had been bred to carry the load of a fully-armored knight. That these horses and riders were vulnerable to the quicker, lighter horsemen of the Arabs only goes to show the extent to which armies and soldiers had become what they were because of the horse.

By the time the horse-mounted Moors conquered Spain in 711 A. D., the horse
had made an imprint on human culture beyond anything prior to its day—and noth-
ing of greater impact was to occur to humanity for another thousand or so years
when the Industrial Revolution effectively reduced the importance of the horse, at
least on a practical level, to a mathematical measure of energy.

**SPAIN**

By the end of the fifteenth century, when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella
decided to underwrite the explorations of a certain Christopher Columbus, the horse
of Spain had already secured its place as an animal of great distinction and desir-
ability. And the make-up of the Spanish horse was much like the history of Spain
itself—fraught with the invasion of foreign blood. As J. Frank Dobie sums it up, the
Spanish horse was essentially “a mestizo.” Even though the Spaniards had high
affection for *el caballo*, the intensity that they put into breeding fighting bulls did not
carry over to horses.

The Spanish horse is often called an Arabian, or sometimes Barbary or Barb,
based on its ownership as well as its most recent geographical point of origin.
An early influence in the horse of Spain came from the North African horses that
first invaded Spain with Hannibal in the second century B. C. The period of Pax
Romana brought an extended period of relative stability to the Iberian Peninsula,
and during this time the Roman cavalry horse established itself as a part of the
horse of Spain. These horses then, along with the native horses of the region,
were bred over time to other strains of horses. The invading Visigoths and Vandals
in the fifth century A. D. brought horses of their own breeding from the North. This
fertile mixture, already containing Arab or Barb blood, was what the invading Mos-
lems found when they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar in 711 A. D.
Breeding high quality horses had been raised to the elevation of a fine art by the Arabs by the time they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into Spain. The prophet Mohammed himself had proclaimed, in a statement that would be branded as politically incorrect today, that the greatest happiness results when a man is enjoying a woman, training his horses, or hunting wild animals. The Moslems found a near-equal in their love of horses in Spain. The Spanish had developed several sporting uses of the horse in relation to the emerging national passion of bullfighting. One had to do with the role of the picador in the bullfight. The other was even more horse-centered, as the bullfight itself was conducted on horseback. This is called el rejoneo and is still practiced by aficionados of the bull and the horse today. At any rate the invading Moslems, on their way to Spain through Northern Africa, took advantage of some of the fine horse stock that the nomadic people of the Barbary Coast had developed. These Barbarie, or Barb, horses added to the characteristics of fleetness, endurance, and intelligence in their own stock, which was further enhanced when bred with the fine horses of Spain.

These horses then soon became the essence of what was called the Spanish horse, the mounts that became so desired throughout Europe as they proved their superiority in battle over the heavy and ponderous horses of the North. William the Conqueror’s success at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, for example, has been credited to his use of light cavalry. Hundreds of years later this horse would be imported in England and selectively bred to form the basis of the horse known as Thoroughbred today. This “Spanish” horse, which we call an Arabian or less often a Barb, was the horse that Columbus loaded onto his ships for his second trip to Hispaniola—and that, of course, is the beginning of the American saga of the horse.
The impact of the horse on the conquest of the Americas was immeasurable. One has only to read any of the accounts given by Bernal Díaz, the soldier journalist who fought for Cortés, to have an immediate appreciation of the place the horse held for both the victors and the vanquished. It is safe to say that the subjugation of the Americas would have taken a completely different form (if indeed it would have happened at all) if the Spanish had not had the horse. More than one account has thousands of Indian soldiers assembled for battle against the always smaller Spanish army. The size of his cavalry? Sixteen horses and mares. The following brief account of one of the first battles provides a profile of many that were to follow (figure 2).

On March 14, 1519, Cortés fought his first battle with the Indians on a plain outside the city of Tabasco. Twelve thousand warriors surrounded the Spaniards. As the Indians fell back before the point blank cannon fire the soldiers cut them up with their swords. This was followed by a cavalry charge of 14 armored horsemen that immobilized the Indian with fright. They had not seen a horse before. Soon 800 Indians lay dead; thousands more were wounded and had to be carried back by the others as they fled.
Scenes of this sort were to be repeated time after time as Cortés made his way into the Valley of Mexico. At first sight the Indians believed the man and horse to be a single terrifying beast, similar to the centaur in Greek mythology. The appearance of such an apparition had similarly terrified earlier peoples of the world, giving the horsemen a psychological edge in addition to physical superiority.

The first horses to “return” to the Americas came on the boats of Christopher Columbus from Spain. They were landed at Hispaniola in 1494 and they were not of the best stock. It is reported that Columbus bought and paid for fine horses from Granada, then one of the centers of horse raising in Spain, but was not present at the ship when the stock was actually loaded. The horse soldiers who had sold their stock were worried about the safety of “their” horses on the long trip and substituted more ordinary horses for the breeding stock Columbus thought he had acquired. While better animals were brought on subsequent voyages (and almost every ship brought more horses to the new world) the purity of the North American horse was always a relative rather than absolute judgement.

As we have seen, Spanish horses reached the North American mainland with
Cortés in 1519. The horses that survived the battles of the conquest, and most apparently did, never left the continent and became part of the stock on the great haciendas that the victors established in the succeeding years. The breeding and raising of horses and cattle occupied the citizens of New Spain on both the mainland and the Caribbean islands, and by 1522 they had such numbers of animals that the importation of stock was no longer necessary to sustain the existence of the animals. Obviously, however, stock continued to be imported for selective breeding purposes.²¹

The horses had arrived and they adapted readily to their new land. Their presence had effected the destruction of previous cultures and was, as we shall see in succeeding chapters, to have a primary influence on the development of the New World.
ENDNOTES

1. I have drawn extensively from Man and Horse in History by Matthew J. Kust (Alexandria, Virginia: Plutarch Press, 1983) for this section on prehistory. There are a number of other texts, naturally, that deal with this area as well.

2. Feral animals are domesticated animals that have returned to the wild; even those born in the wild from previously domesticated stock are called feral. Wild animals are those which have never been domesticated and continue a self-sustaining population. The term wild horses as used in America blurs this distinction. In order to keep things simple, I will use the term wild horse to refer to the feral horses of the American Southwest.

3. Dobie, J. Frank, The Mustangs (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1934) 139. Dobie, whose obviously comprehensive scholarship is sprinkled with occasional dry wit, reports that stallions of the wild horse era in Texas "were as lacking in discrimination as the old cowman, who declared he had never tasted bad whiskey or seen an ugly woman."


5. Clutton-Brock, Juliet, Horse Power (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992) 11. The painting at these sites are believed to have been of the now-extinct European horse, circa 12,000 B.C.


10. Dobie, 7-8.

11. The name "Arab" has much less to do with the nationality of the horse than it does with the nationality of the person who was riding it at the time an early historical reference is made. When Christian crusaders met the infidels of the Middle East, they branded the horse of their enemy with the name "Arab" or "Arabian." That name has stuck.

13. The job of the **picador** is to wear down the bull, to take a little of the snap out of him before the **matador** enters the ring. Mounted on a horse heavily armored and padded, the **picador** repeatedly closes with the bull, and using a long-handled lance, *la pica*, he repeatedly jabs the bull at the top of its shoulders, thus weakening the neck muscles and making it more difficult for the bull to raise its head and hook with its horns. It requires great bravery on the part of the horse.

**El rehorneo** places the entire spectacle of the bullfight on horseback and requires finely trained and courageous horses. The killing of the bull with a precise sword thrust from the back of a moving horse is obviously very difficult and very dangerous. Regardless of what one may think of bullfighting in general, the level of training and courage required of the horse must be respected.

14. Among the finest horses of Spain were the stallions of Andalusia. Maximillian II of Austria imported stallions of this type to stand at stud in Lipizza, where the breed has been maintained ever since. One can still see the horse of Andalucia in a performance of the Royal Lipizzaners today.

15. Smith, 44.


17. Dobie, 17.


20. Conn, 2.
Looking Further

Suggested Readings


Suggested Lines of Enquiry

1. Look into the story of breeds of horses. When, where, and why are all fruitful questions to ask here. Write to organizations like the American Quarter Horse Association that specifically promote a given breed.

2. The history of brands will lead you to some interesting material regarding the practices of owning horses and horse ranches.

3. Find out all you can about the historical use of horses in warfare.
Horses
Origins and Influences

ACROSS
1 cave with ancient paintings
4 a horse from North Africa
5 Spanish for horse
9 bullfighting from horseback
11 discoverer of Mongolian wild horse

DOWN
2 a mixed blood
3 horse-mounted soldiers
5 horse-driven war machine
6 name of Alexander's mount
7 early human type
8 early horse; known as "dawn horse"
10 famous Mongolian horseman
“Starface”

(from The Mustangs by J. Frank Dobie, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1934)

Starface was a deep bay with a white star-shaped patch in his forehead and a stocking on his right forefoot. It was believed that he had Morgan blood in his veins; he might have been pure Spanish. In 1878 he was commanding a large band of mustangs that ranged between the Cimarron and Currumpa rivers in No Man’s Land—the westward-pointing panhandle of Oklahoma. Every step that Starface took was a gesture of power and pride.

He would have been a marked horse anywhere, but his character made him even more noted than his carriage. He was the boldest gallant and the most magnificent thief that the Cimarron ranges had ever known. Most ranchmen in No Man’s Land had horse herds as well as cattle and some raised horses altogether. Whenever Starface felt the blood stir in him, he would raid down upon these ranch horses, fight off the domestic stallions, cut out a bunch of mares with or without colts, and herd them back into his own well-trained bunch. The country was as yet unfenced, and Starface knew it all, claimed it all. He became a terror.

No man could walk him down, for Starface refused to circle. Nor could any man get near enough to crease him. Finally, the harassed ranchers organized to capture him. They took hundreds of long-distance shots at him; they cut off most of his followers; but he still ran free. Then they picked four cowboys, furnished them with the strongest and fastest horses in the country, and told them not to come back until they had killed or captured Starface. The four scouted for nearly a week before they sighted Starface’s band. By keeping out of sight and riding in relays, they dogged the suspicious mustangs for three days and nights. Most of the time
the cowboys kept back in the edge of the breaks on the south side of the Cimarron.

They studied the habits of mustangs as they had never studied them before. They marveled at the discipline by which the stallion kept his band in order. Now he would leave them and graze off alone, and not a mare would dare follow. Now he would round them into a knot that no yearling dared break from. Again he would course out with every animal obediently at his heels. Starface seemed to require less sleep than any other horse of the band.

It was early fall and the moon was in full quarter. Shortly after midnight on the fourth night the two cowboys on watch saw Starface leave his mares and head for the river flats. One man followed while his partner sped back to arouse their companions. A light dew on the grass made trailing easy; besides, the stallion was so intent on his quest that he seemed to pay no regard to what might be behind him. For six miles he galloped into the north.

Then, about ten miles east of the present town of Kenton, he entered a grassy canyon. Spreading out between walls of rock on either side, this canyon narrows down into a chute that, in time of rains, pitches its waters off a bluff into the Cimarron River. Not far above the brink at the canyon mouth Starface passed through a narrow gateway of boulders shutting in a small valley.

Daylight was not far away when the cowboys came to the pass. They were familiar with the boxed structure of the canyon below them. They knew Starface would before long be returning with his stolen mares. They decided to wait for him. They were sure that their opportunity had come. They were all determined to catch Starface rather than kill him, for studying him had changed vengeance into admiration.
In the early light they watched the bold stallion maneuvering about a dozen mares and colts. They were untrained to his methods, and Starface was wheeling and running in every direction, checking his captives at one point and whipping them up at another. Like a true master, he was intent on his business. For once, he was off guard.

He had worked the bunch into the pass, where the walls were hardly a hundred feet apart, and now the mares were stringing into discipline, when suddenly the four cowboys dashed from behind the boulders. Pistol shots shook the morning stillness. The wild Texas yell frenzied even the dullest of the mares. Ropes slapped against leather legging and sang in the air.

With a wild snort of challenge, Starface charged alone up the steep canyon side. At first the cowboys thought he had discovered a trail out unknown to them. They stood still, watching, not a gun drawn. As the mustang ascended into a patch of sunlight allowed by a break in the walls on the opposite side of the canyon they could see the sheen of light on his muscles. One of them called out, “God, look at the King of the horse world!” Long afterwards in describing the scene he added, “not a man at that moment would have shot that animal for all the horses north of Red River.”

But only for a brief time were they doubtful of capturing the superb stallion. They saw him leap to a bench as wide perhaps as a big corral—wide enough for a reckless cowboy to rope and manage an outlaw mustang upon. Towering above that bench was the caprock, without a seam or a slope in its face. Starface had picked the only spot at which the bench could be gained. But, like the canyon floor he had fled from, it ended in space—a sheer jump of ninety feet to the boulder-strewn bed of the Cimarron.
“Come on, we’ve got him,” yelled one of the mustangers.

Under the excitement, the horses they were riding leaped up the way the mustang had led. Now he was racing back and forth along the bench. As the leading rider emerged to the level, he saw Starface make his last dash.

He was headed for the open end of the bench. At the brink he gathered his feet as if to vault the Cimarron itself, and then, without halting a second, he sprang into space. For a flash of time, without tumbling, he remained stretched out, terror in his streaming mane and tail, the madness of ultimate defiance in his eyes. With him it was truly “Give me Liberty or give me Death.”
Chapter Two
CATTLE IN THE AMERICAS

SPANISH ORIGINS

The story of cattle in the Americas begins in Spain, where cattle had been domesticated for thousands of years prior to the time of Columbus. The Spanish interest in cattle was similar to that of other Europeans in most respects. Cattle provided, first and foremost, energy to pull plows and haul produce to market. Another important use of the cow was milk and its derivatives. Finally, when the animal was of no further use, its hide was tanned and its flesh, called carne de res, was consumed. Only the very wealthy could afford to eat beef on any basis other than the final use of the animal.

It should also be noted that the Spaniards had a significantly different interest in cattle as well—the breeding of bulls for la corrida de toros—the bullfight. The fascination of the Iberians with bulls goes back some 15,000 years to the days of the hunter-gatherer and is well documented in the paintings on the cave walls in Lascaux and Altamira. The Moors also made significant contributions to this interest during their long occupation of Spain. However, this tradition has little to do with the American cattle that became the Texas Longhorn. While there is a connection in the popular mind that these toros bravos were among the first shipped to America, that is simply not the case.

The initial cattle shipped to the Americas were probably obtained either at the points of embarkation from the mainland (such as Cádiz and Sanlúcar) or in the Canary Islands, the first and only port of call on the way to the Americas. In either case it was basically the same stock, as Andalusian cattle had been used to stock the previously cattle-barren Canaries only twenty years prior.
The criteria for selection were common-sensical. The cattle were obtained with cost as a consideration. Young pregnant heifers were taken with the "two for one" philosophy in mind. The ratio of cows to bulls ran about five to one. Animals were taken that were proven for their drafting ability and for their milk production. Clearly, the temperament of the animal was considered for the long confinement of the voyage. While all these considerations might have called for a "special" animal, the one that best fit the bill was the common Andalusian variety.

This animal was of three broad color groups: red (known simply as retinto), solid black (Andalusian), and white (Barrenda and Cacereño). Common features included high tails and narrow heads. The most salient feature of all three color groups was the horns: large, widespread, and up-turned—easily recognized today as the headgear of the Longhorn. While a modicum of blood from the fighting bulls was probably present from time immemorial, the common Andalusian cattle bore no resemblance to that spirited breed. They were tractable and dependable beasts of burden as well as milk producers.

TO THE AMERICAS

The shipping route from Spain to the Americas was established by Columbus’ second voyage. Ships left southern ports in Spain and traveled 900 miles south-by-southwest to reach the Canary Islands. After a layover to refit and take on fresh water and supplies, they continued on their way the 2,500 miles or so to the Indies. It was established over time that the total trip could take up to two months, but the second voyage of Columbus found steady winds and arrived only 22 days after leaving the Canaries. The transportation of cattle on extended sea voyages was a completely new enterprise, and many animals were lost; however, enough survived for breeding to take place.
The first cattle in the Western Hemisphere arrived off the north coast of Hispaniola in November, 1493. On this trip Columbus had 17 ships, with some 1,200 crew and colonists. They also carried horses, hogs, sheep, plants, and seeds. While everyone knows that "in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue," it was the voyage of 1493 that changed the very face of the Western Hemisphere. Entire species were introduced (or re-introduced as is the case with the horse) as blithely and without thought to consequence as can be imagined. It says a lot about the Spaniards and their mindset that they simply saw the islands of the Caribbean and the mainland of
North America as personal treasure troves, and that, without compunction or much deliberation, they imported an entirely new culture to the New World.

The mechanics of loading and unloading the animals is also a matter for speculation, as very little was recorded. Horses were almost certainly loaded either by a gangplank or by being hoisted aboard in a sling-like apparatus (figure 3). Cattle, presumably, were handled in the same way. At any rate, the off-loading of the early shipments, at least before port facilities were established, must have been problematic at best. Perhaps the animals were forced into the sea, from whence they would swim for shore. Perhaps they were off-loaded onto makeshift rafts and ferried onto the beaches. It is known that the survivors of the journey found good pasture and soon overcame their weakened condition from weeks at sea.

The early cattle raising efforts on Hispaniola sputtered off and on for a few years. The colonists occasionally "thought with their stomachs" and consumed some of the prime breeding animals. The influx of cattle from Spain was not steady, as Spain herself suffered a cattle shortage in the early 1500's. Cattle that did make it to Hispaniola, however, found themselves in a paradise of pasture unknown to their ancestors in Southern Spain, where the pasturage resembled that of the arid American Southwest. When the cattle managed to escape the butcher knives of the hungry colonists, they grew faster and reproduced more quickly than those that had remained in their native land.

Soon Hispaniola was being used as the stocking point for nearby islands. In the early 1500's breeding herds were placed on Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba. Shortly thereafter the pastures of the Greater and Lesser Antilles were stocked. Within the scant three decades that followed the first importation of cattle from Spain, the industry gained self-sufficiency. By 1512 ships' manifests made only rare reference to cattle, although meticulous listings of every other item contained on ship, including horses, were made. The only logical inference is that it was no longer necessary to import cattle from Spain.\(^6\)
Only a scant few decades from the introduction of the species to the New World the brood stock for two continents stood ready for shipment on a half dozen islands. From this start came virtually all the cattle of South America, Central America, and the western half of North America.7

THE AMERICAS

From the islands of Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica the stocking of the mainlands of North and South America began in earnest early in the 1500's. The cattle of Andalusia found themselves on ships to what became the United States, Mexico, Honduras, Panama, Venezuela, and Columbia. While the primary interest of this enquiry is to follow the herds to Mexico and northward, it is interesting to note that this great scattering of Andalusian cattle met with virtually unmitigated success at nearly every location. Occasionally the initial herds (and their herders) were wiped out by hostile Indians, but for the most part this didn’t happen.8 The cattle proved immensely adaptable to the various climates they found themselves in, and, as they moved inland and higher in elevation, their original orientation as cattle of harsh and spare country only served to further assure their survival.

MEXICO

The first breeding herd to land in New Spain was brought by Gregorio Villalobos and landed on the Pánuco River near modern-day Tampico in 1521 (figure 4). Within the next year numerous other herds were landed slightly farther south at Veracruz. As the conquest of Mexico was assured the herds radiated outward onto the large
haciendas that the conquistadors awarded themselves. The areas south and then north of Mexico City were stocked with cattle, as were Guatemala and Honduras. By 1530 Cortés himself was raising cattle south of Mexico City in an area he named, appropriately enough, **Cuernavaca**, or "horn of the cow."

In general the cattle frontier by the middle of the 1500's stretched across Central Mexico on a line from Tampico to the mouth of the Bay of California. This line was to continue northward at a rapid if not steady rate. In 1541, for example, Coronado set off on his quest for the golden Seven Cities of Cibola with over five hundred head of cattle as well as thousands of sheep, goats, and hogs as food for his expedition. It is known that he left a number of exhausted cattle in Sinaloa,
which may or may not have recovered from the ardors of their journey enough to breed and multiply. By about this same time free-ranging cattle were reported as far north as the present United States-Mexican border. Nearly 60 years later, in another huge jump north of the cattle frontier, the expedition of Juan Oñate trailed as many as 7,000 head of cattle into New Mexico, although much lower estimates are also given. New Mexico, however, turned out to be better suited as sheep country and has remained so to this day.

By the time of the American Revolution the cattle industry had established itself throughout Northern Mexico, Southern Texas, and California. Instrumental in this movement was the Spanish mission system. The missionaries moved north into new territories, always taking livestock of all kinds with them. The missions met with varying success; some Indians, notably the Navajos and the California Indians, adapted themselves rather easily to the new way of life the Catholic padres presented. Others, like the Comanche and Apache made life on earth into a living hell for the missionaries. In both cases, and against the express law of the land, the missionaries taught Indians to ride horses and to take care of the vacas. This indiscretion is part of the rich and varied story of the vaquero and his North American permutation the cowboy, and is addressed in a separate chapter.

The settlement of California was the last and most successful colonizing efforts of the Spanish in the New World. California was a long way from the seat of power in Mexico, and as such it had been largely ignored by the Spanish. However, as other countries began to show interest in colonizing California, Spain decided to secure its lands. Missions, linked by el camino real, the King’s highway, were set up from San Diego to San Francisco in the 1770’s. This mission system, run by Franciscan monks, was highly successful in the cattle business. Longhorns were raised for hide and tallow, and a brisk trade ensued at the ports. The slaughter of cattle, called matanzas, brought all the vaqueros together and impromptu rodeos were common. Displays of horsemanship and skill with la reata, the rope, were
also common to these events. However colorful, the culture of the Californios was to be short-lived. When Mexico gained its independence from Spain the power of the church was broken. The cattle business went to private hands and shortly thereafter, the gold rush changed the dynamics of the California economy beyond recognition.

By 1800, then, the cattle that were becoming known as Longhorns were established as standard fixtures in Texas and California, and to a lesser degree in New Mexico and Arizona. Large herds lived in a state of near wildness; even though ostensibly owned by someone, much of the cattle roamed free on unfenced and seemingly unlimited range land. The cattle of Andalusia were literally at home on the range of the American West. It was the point in time when the culture of the vaquero met the rising tide of immigrants to the Southwest, spawning the most recognizable of American icons—the cowboy.
ENDNOTES

1. I have relied extensively on The Criollo by John E. Rouse (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977) for factual data concerning the Spanish origins of the Longhorn.

2. Rouse, 20. While there is a connection in the popular mind that these toros bravos were among the first shipped to America, that is simply not the case. Fighting bulls were first shipped to Mexico in 1552. These carefully selected animals formed the breeding stock for the Toluca ranch of one Juan Gutierrez Altamirano, a cousin of Hernán Cortés. The entire process was clearly an exercise of privilege by a wealthy man. By the time his shipment of 12 pairs of bulls and cows arrived the number of cattle in the New World numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

3. Rouse, 15.


5. Rouse, 24. Rouse and others note that the portion of the Atlantic Ocean known as the “Horse Latitudes” came to be called that because the extended calms that the area is known for precipitated the deaths of many horses, which were generally buried at sea. It is not known whether cattle also died during these calms, but it can be assumed so. Whether the cows were then run through the galley is also unknown. The relative value which the Spaniard assigned to the animals is of note: They did not name the area “Cow Latitudes.”

6. Rouse, 34.

7. The scope of this enquiry does not include the cattle of Brazil, imported by the Portugese at a later date, nor the cattle of the eastern seaboard of the United States.

8. The experience of the Spaniards in Florida is distinctive. There they met with disaster after disaster, first as conquistadores and later as colonists. The Indians of Florida were exceptionally fierce and intractable.

9. Dobie, J. Frank. The Longhorns (Boston: Little, Brown and Co.) 4. Rouse disagrees with Dobie on this point. His feeling is that any cattle Coronado lost were consumed along the route, either by the Spaniards or by Indians. Dobie points out that virtually all cattle were intact as breeders and that breeding occurred on a regular and on-going basis. He points to a report of “cattle running wild by the thousands” only twenty-five years later. Rouse says there is no substantiation. It appears to be an open question.
Looking Further

Suggested Readings


Suggested Lines of Enquiry

1. Look into the history of brands and branding practices.

2. Research the roots of the Montana Stockgrower’s Association.

3. Examine the place of the bullfight in Spanish culture. Look into its beginnings as well as its current form.

4. Prior to the big cattle drives from Texas to Montana there were many other, smaller, drives around the West. Hint: These were often associated with the mining frontiers.
Cattle
Origins and Influences

ACROSS

4 the slaughtering of cattle
6 port of call on the way to the Indies
9 horn of the cow
11 the outside of a cow
12 Spanish for cow

DOWN

1 Spanish for bulls
2 port in south of Spain
3 Spanish for meat
5 early settlement island
7 large ranch for cattle raising
8 otherwise known as fat
9 usually followed by "de toros"
10 Spanish for red
“Sancho”

(from On the Open Range by J. Frank Dobie, The Southwest Press, Dallas, 1931.)

On the Esperanza Creek in Frio County, Texas, lived a man by the name of Kerr. He had a Mexican wife named Maria, a jacal (cabin) built of mesquite poles and thatched with bear grass, and a few longhorned cattle. Among these cattle was a three-year-old steer spotted black and white. An animal so colored is called a "paint."

Kerr had found the paint when it was a dogie—a poor motherless calf—and had carried it in home across his saddle and given it to Maria. That night Maria tried to feed the helpless creature milk out of a pan, but raising a calf "by hand" is no end of trouble. The next day Kerr rode around the range until he found a thrifty-looking cow that had a young calf; then he drove her to the pen. By tying this cow's head close up to a post so that she could not move about and hobbling her hind legs so that she could not kick, Kerr and Maria persuaded her to let the dogie suckle. After this operation was repeated every evening for a month or so, the cow more or less adopted the orphan calf for a twin to her own offspring. The calves were kept in the pen during the day while the cow grazed, and when she came in about sundown and they were released for their supper, it was a cheering sight to see them wiggle their tails while they guzzled milk.

The dogie was a vigorous little brute, and before long, judging from the way he thrrove, he seemed to be getting more milk than the cow's own calf. Maria called him Sancho, a Mexican name meaning "pet." She was especially fond of Sancho, and he was fond of her.

She taught him to eat tamales, which are made of ground corn rolled around some meat and wrapped in a shuck. As everybody who has eaten them knows,
Mexican tamales are highly seasoned with peppers. In southern Texas these peppers grow wild, but cattle seldom, if ever, taste them. They leave them for wild turkeys to gobble down. However, by eating tamales, Sancho developed a taste for the little red chili peppers growing along the shady spots of Esperanza Creek. The shucks around the tamales and the *masa* (meal) in them gave him a tooth for corn, and when he was a yearling he began breaking through the brush fence that enclosed Kerr’s corn patch. A forked stick had to be tied around his neck to prevent his getting through the fence. Like many other pets, Sancho was something of a pest. When he could not steal corn or was not humored with tamales, he was enormously contented with the grass and the mesquite beans along the Esperanza. As he grew up, he remained a pet and every night came close to the cabin to sleep.

In the spring of 1879, the Shiner brothers made a contract to deliver three herds of steers in Montana. A part of their range lay along the Esperanza Creek, and while they were gathering cattle Kerr asked them if they would buy Sancho. They bought him, road-branded him 7 Z, and put him in the first herd going north. The other herds were to follow two or three days apart.

That first day the herd was driven only a few miles. Along late in the afternoon it was watered, and then the cattle grazed until nearly dusk, when they were “thrown together”—or bunched—and bedded down. As was the custom, cowboys then began to ride around the cattle so as to keep any of them from walking off. But Sancho did not want to lie down. He wanted to go back to the cabin on the Esperanza to sleep—and perhaps to get a tamale. A dozen times during the night the cowboys had to drive him back into the herd.

When the herd started on the next morning, Sancho was at the tail end of it, trying to stop and often looking back. It took most of the attention of one cowboy to keep him going. Thus it was every day and every night. As Sancho was very
gentle, sometimes a cowboy would rope him at night and stake him to a bush so that he could not walk off. When the herd stopped to graze, spreading out like a fan, the ribs always pointed northward, Sancho invariably pointed himself south. Finally he slipped out of the herd and struck a bee line for the Esperanza. But the second Shiner herd coming along picked him up and he had to keep going north. After traveling with this second herd a while, he escaped only to be caught by the Shiner men with the third herd. They knew him by his road-brand, 7 Z.

Meantime the cattle were trailing, trailing north. For five hundred miles across Texas to Red River they trailed. Then across Red River, across the Washita, across the South Canadian, the North Canadian, the Cimarron, the sullen Arkansas, leaving the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) behind. Then across western Kansas, into Nebraska, beyond the roaring Ogallala town, across the wide, wide Platte, around the Black Hills, across Powder River, under the Big Horn Mountains, across the Yellowstone, and clear up to the Missouri River. For two thousand miles, moving from ten to fifteen miles a day, the Shiner herds trailed.

When finally, after listening for months, day and night, to the slow song of their motion, the "dogies" reached their new home, Sancho was still at the tail of the last herd and was still sniffing to the south for a whiff of the Mexican Gulf. The farther he got from home, the less he liked the change. He had never felt frost in September before.

The Montana ranchman received the cattle. Then for ten days the Texas men helped his outfit brand C R on the longhorns before turning them loose on the new range. When Sancho's turn came to be branded in the chute, one of the Texas cowboys yelled out, "There goes my pet. Stamp that C R brand on him good and deep."
And now the Shiner men turned south, taking back with them their saddle horses and chuck wagons, and leaving Sancho behind. A blue norther was whistling through their slickers when they reached Frio County below San Antonio. A trail hand was supposed to get most of his sleep in the winter, for he had to ride by night as well as by day during the summer. The Shiner cowboys slept. Then with the first grass of spring they were in the saddle, gathering cattle for another drive up the trail.

"We were close to Kerr's cabin on Esperanza Creek," John Rigby, who worked for the Shiner brothers, told me, "when I looked across a flat and saw something that made me rub my eyes. I was riding with Joe Shiner and we both stopped our horses.

"Do you know that steer over yonder?" I asked.

"By grabs, it's old Sancho," he chuckled. "And I do believe the rascal is looking for chili peppers."

We galloped over, and you can hang me for a horse thief if it wasn't that Sancho paint, with the Shiner road-brand 7 Z showing neat and plain behind the shoulder and the Montana C R as big as a sign board on his ribs.

Kerr told us that Sancho had been back only a few weeks. He said that when Sancho arrived his hoofs were worn down almost to the hair. Maria just hugged him and cried and made him up a big batch of tamales right away.

Joe Shiner said that if old Sancho loved his home enough to walk back those two thousand miles he could stay. He lived right there on the Esperanza, tickling his palate with chili peppers and keeping fat on mesquite grass until he died.

Sancho was just a longhorn traveler.
Chapter Three

COWBOYS AND VAQUEROS

"Certainly one will have to go up the trail to Montana to finish out the story of the Texas cowboy."

J. Frank Dobie, Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1942.)

PROVISO

Of the voluminous literature on the American West, there is no greater portion than what has been written on the cowboy. However, much of what has been written in the last sixty or seventy years is simply repetitious at best, and often fictitious as well. In this environment, finding reliable sources is troublesome and problematic. When asked about the research methods for his books, Arnold Rojas, a old time vaquero who would be one hundred years old if he were still alive, stated emphatically, "I got my material around the campfire and in the bunkhouse on winter nights. I have never used a library...I don't think I could find factual material about vaqueros in a library."¹

Rojas was both right and wrong in his assessment. As the era of the cowboy is long past, access to primary sources around campfires is no longer possible. He was right about that. However, his books and other authentically constructed nar-
narratives are available. One does have to be cautious in reading the stories of the West; much hyperbole and romance have found their way on to the shelves. However, it is possible to see, as best one can through the filter of time and language, the worlds of the cowboy and of the vaquero.

My goal in writing about the cowboy and his historical antecedent the vaquero is to highlight the Spanish roots of herding cattle from horseback and spotlight the continuing Spanish influence in the West both linguistically and otherwise, because of that historical activity. As always, the best place to start seems to be the beginning.

**EL VAQUERO**

As we have seen, the Americas were dramatically changed by the presence of the Spaniards and their livestock. A continent that contained neither horses nor cattle in 1492 was teeming with the beasts less than one hundred years later. Entire empires had been wiped out and new cultures were emerging. The conquistador had awarded himself, and those in his favor, huge parcels of land, called encomiendas, as part of the spoils. And once the appetite for gold had been somewhat satisfied—and it never really was—the Spanish began to capitalize on the vast agricultural potential of the land itself. They saw that the lands of Mexico and the Southwest, while perhaps lacking in gold, were well suited to open range livestock operations.²

At the beginning of the sixteenth century cattle roamed freely over the lands of central Mexico with little or no restraint, but this situation did not last long. Soon Indian farmers were complaining about crops being trodden under by cattle. Encomenderos expressed concern over ownership rights to land and water, as well as livestock. The furor resulted in the creation of the Mesta in 1529, the first
stockmen’s organization in the Americas. Among other administrative edicts, the Mesta required that brands be used and registered in order to prove ownership of cattle. While the use of chute pens and electric irons can make this activity somewhat less demanding today, branding then was a labor-intensive job, difficult, dirty, and dangerous. Not a job for the aristocratic Spanish, the work of cattle raising was bound to fall to the Indian and mestizo.

The mechanics of this situation presented the Spanish with a genuine problem. As we have seen, Cortés and his men recognized that their conquest of Mexico was due in large part to their possession of the horse. And, recognizing that Indians on horseback could become worthy foes—as indeed they later did—the Spanish legally barred them from owning or riding horses. While a true Spaniard loved his horses and the wealth of owning thousands of cattle, he had no desire to ride herd. The general disposition of the Spaniard in that day, remember, was to expropriate someone else’s wealth and to live well from someone else’s labor. The laborer in this case was the one that worked with the vacas: the vaquero. It soon became evident that the only realistic way to work the open range was by horseback. Among the first to realize this were the padres of the mission system, who generally did not like to ride themselves. In addition, their remote locations allowed them—rather ironically—the luxury of transgression without immediate apprehension. Their trusted converts were taught to ride and the Mexican vaquero never voluntarily dismounted again.

The cattle industry grew rapidly, varying from a beef emphasis to a hide-and-tallow trade, to a combination of the two. Some years the industry suffered from lack of foreign market, others it boomed when ships to Europe were available. There was always some local market, with varying demand. Cattle were driven north to feed the miners when silver was discovered at Zacatecas. The tallow from these animals was made into candles that lit the miner’s way beneath the earth. In any case the expansion of cattle ranching was nearly constant, both to the south
and the north. By the end of the 1500's the cattle industry was well established throughout Northern Mexico and had even crossed the Rio Bravo into Texas. At the very core of this culture was the *vaquero*, who had used the past century to modify and refine his techniques and his trappings to fit the integral role he was playing.

The central position of the Mexican *vaquero* to this entire movement is seen in the linguistic residue that clings like salty sweat to the flanks of a hard-driven horse. The language of the American West is heavily influenced by the Spanish, not just at *el rancho*, but at every turn. Spanish place names are so common that they are not even thought of as Spanish. Mexican food terminology is standard fare. In fact, while the word *vaquero* itself is a somewhat regional term, its English form *buckaroo* is common in American English. In similar fashion, the *vaquero* culture has loaned many a term to the horse-and-cattle industry that helped form the West as we know it today. In order to see how that happened we must meet the “cowboy”—the anglo version of the *vaquero*.

**THE COWBOY**

As we have seen, the cattle tender known as a *vaquero* is a product of the Mexican cattle industry; the “cow-boy” is the product of the cattle industry as it grew and spread throughout the United States, particularly in the South. While the Mexican *vaquero* culture, albeit much reduced in size, continued to exist in “pure” form right into the early twentieth century in California, the story in Texas is much different. There the *vaquero* culture became mixed with the influence from American settlers, particularly from the South. It was the product of this mixture that drove the cattle herds north to Montana in the later part of the nineteenth century, thus carrying the linguistic influence of the Spanish, in a span of less than twenty
years, far beyond its otherwise southwestern borders.

The importance of the opening of the Northern Rockies to the Texas Longhorns cannot be underestimated when looking at the linguistic influence that came north with the herds. Much of the vocabulary of cattle ranching and the horse culture is related to Spanish terminology. Many of these terms are examined in the chapter that deals with the gear and techniques of the cowboy. While there is a certain romanticism implicit in this, it should not be forgotten that this came about through the eradication of millions of bison and the decimation of entire tribes of Indians.

None the less, the meeting of these two cattle cultures on the llanos of Texas, for the most part after the Civil War, provided each the chance to learn from the other, although the Mexican vaquero undoubtedly had more to offer when it came to practical knowledge in handling horses and cattle. The world of the vaquero was open-range ranching and he was right at home with the wild mustangs and longhorns either on the plains or in the vast brushy country known as the brazada. While some immigrants were riders and had some knowledge of cattle, many did not. Some early anglo settlers arrived with Moses Austin, whose son Stephen was instrumental in establishing an immigration policy for Mexico in 1825. Immigrants in almost all ages have been the poor and dispossessed and it was no different in Texas. The Mexican government offered land grants to settlers for both farming and ranching; by claiming both occupations, whether in fact he knew either, an immigrant could claim a grant of 4,615 acres.\textsuperscript{11} This kind of acreage and the notion of open range ranching were both foreign concepts to many of the new colonists, most of whom were Southerners, and the wealthier of whom brought their slaves along. The descendants of these slaves were to be some of the black cowboys that came north to Montana.\textsuperscript{12}

The cowboys from the Southeast was used to working cattle not from horseback, but from his own two feet. This cowboy had made virtue of a necessity and was unparalleled in his ability to bulldog, although he readily recognized the advan-
tage of the horse and soon mounted up. Wrestling cattle in the dust and dung of a corral, however skillfully done, was disdainful to the vaquero, and he let his prejudice be known. The natural result of these disagreements among men of action was contests to prove superiority. Certainly one of the roots of the modern spectacle known as rodeo is to be found here.

The cowboys and vaqueros were, however, much more alike than they were different. They were almost all poor in material goods. They were highly independent. They were resourceful and tough, skilled and proud. They differed on relatively, at least to us, small matters. One preferred a centerfire saddle; the other rode a rimfire. One was a "dally-man" while the other kept his rope tied. One used a spade bit while the other used a snaffle. One was "strong on pretty" while the other preferred plainer gear. It is in explanation of these terms and the close examination of this gear that the differences and similarities can best be shown—and this will also provide us with the chance to appreciate the fact that although the word vaquero has faded, many of the other Spanish terms have not.
ENDNOTES


2. *The Spanish West*, George G. Daniels, ed., New York: Time-Life Books, 43. Francisco de Coronado, whose quest for the Quivira came up empty in 1542, noted the rich soils of present-day Kansas, but his desire for quick riches kept him from pursuing any agricultural possibilities.

3. Dary, David, *Cowboy Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981) 9. The Mesta was patterned largely after the Mesta in Spain, and was primarily concerned with cattle rather than horses, although interestingly enough the word mustang can be traced to a form of the word Mesta. Branding itself is virtually as old as the domestication of animals. I have relied on Dary's vast knowledge in the general preparation of this chapter.

4. Dary, 12, 22. The Mesta was revised in 1579. One revision specifically forbid the ownership of horses by anyone other than a Spaniard. This served to limit ownership for a time, yet was basically ineffective over the years. *Vaqueros* were often paid in livestock, including horses, and the ownership was always a difficult thing to prove. If ownership could be proven the penalty was stiff for the *vaquero*. First offense brought 100 lashes; second offense was 200 lashes and the removal of the convicted's ears.

5. Riding slowly without much ability was known as riding "*a la cura.*"

6. Dary, 24. In 1591 and 1592 no hides were shipped to Spain. In 1594, partial figures reveal about 75,000 hides shipped. In 1598 150,000 hides were shipped to Europe, as boats were plentiful that year.

7. Many books have been written dealing with Spanish place names. Spanish place names are found in abundance in the American Southwest, as might be expected from the dominance of this area by the Spaniards. Perhaps more surprising is the sprinkling of Spanish names all around the U. S. Another intriguing aspect is the Spanish-English or English-Spanish blend that is largely found in California, but can also been seen in other areas of the West; examples are *Buena* Park and Point *Loma*. An interesting text on this subject, from which these examples are drawn, is *A Dictionary of Spanish Terms in English*, by Harold W. Bentley (Columbia University Press, New York, 1932).

8. The word *buckaroo* emerges from California. Some of the sailors from the eastern seaboard who arrived on the shores of California in the early nineteenth century married into the upper levels of that society, and took quite readily to the riding and roping of the *vaquero* culture. They anglicized *vaquero* to bukeros; from there it was a short trip to buckaroo. It is interesting to speculate on the presence of the word buck in this context. Certainly the ready adoption of the word to English was aided by the fact that horses buck, and that the encouragement "Ride 'em *vaquero*" must have rung out a time or two in California corrals.
9. Dary, 82-83. The word cowboy itself, or cow-boy as it was first used, has its own history. If first appeared in Ireland about 1,000 A.D., and was applied to those who worked with cattle. The name gained notoriety when it was applied to some Irish cow-boys who were given a choice between American and prison. As an occupation in the East, trailing cows on foot to market was not seen as desirable. The term was first used in Texas in the early 1800's, but the predominant word used to describe the mounted cattle tender remained vaquero until at least the 1860's. This was true regardless of the cowboy's race. The men who drove the cattle north from Texas were both cow-boys and vaqueros; the term cow-boy was written as such until around 1900, when it became the familiar cowboy. To keep things simple, I'll generally use the modern form cowboy in this paper.

10. For an interesting squabble between two absolutely authentic westerners see Vaqueros by Arnold R. Rojas (Santa Barbara: McNally and Lofton, Publishers, 1964) 5, and Cowboys North and South by Will James (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1925) 10. Although they disagree on terminology, they basically agree that the cowboy of Texas was a mixed bag, while the California vaquero was of a more singular culture.

11. Dary, 68.

12. One cowboy in three was either Mexican or black; an interesting text that deals with the black aspect of the cowboy culture is The Negro Cowboys by Phillip Durham and Everett L. Jones (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1965).

13. Independent, that is, once they had escaped the encomienda system in Mexico and the tyranny of slavery in the South. While virtually all cowboys remained poor, they found it very difficult to think of themselves that way. They were lords of the Plains, and they knew it.

Looking Further

Suggested Readings


James, Will. *Cowboys North and South*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925.


Suggested Lines of Enquiry

1. Concentrate on the vaquero culture by seeking information specific to the California cowboy.

2. Examine the word buckaroo and try to explain its Spanish roots. Hint: The similarity of the b and the v sounds in Spanish have something to do with this.

3. Study the history of rodeo. Look at its roots as well as its current form. Which events are associated with vaquero culture, and which are more cowboy in nature?
ACROSS

4 home of the Palimino breed
7 Spanish stockmen’s organization
8 a Mexican cowboy
9 required mark of ownership
10 plains of Texas
11 to wrestle cattle on foot

DOWN

1 English version of vaquero
2 ran the mission system
3 authentic and dimestore
5 Moses and Stephen
6 Also Rio Grande
9 Brushy country of Texas
“Up the Trail”

(adapted from Up the Trail in ’79 by Baylis John Fletcher, excerpted in Cowboy Life, edited by William W. Savage, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1975.)

On the morning of April 11, a supreme moment for us, we started up the trail to Cheyenne, Wyoming. To gather the cattle in the pasture into one great herd took up the forenoon. In the afternoon we made only about five miles, bedding our cattle that night just south of Victoria, near the Guadalupe River. On the following morning we forded the river, which was low....

On the second night, when we were camped near the source of Spring Creek, a real midnight stampede occurred. All hands were called to the saddle, and it was near dawn before we could return to our pallets for rest. We proceeded to the north and, in a few days, reached the mouth of Peach Creek, north of Cuero....

Here water was procured in the Guadalupe River, and we stopped on its banks to rest our cattle and eat dinner. While grazing the cattle along the bank of the river, we discovered a big alligator idly floating on the water’s surface. All hands were attracted by the strange sight and began shouting at the big saurian, who protected himself by sinking out of sight in the turbid waters.

After dinner Joe Felder took off his boots and washed his feet in the river. Then he sat on the root of a big tree facing the stream and fell asleep. Manuel García, our cook, conceived a practical joke. Throwing a log so that it fell into the river just in front of the sleeping Joe, he shouted, “Alligator!” In a quick effort to rise, Joe slipped into the river, going entirely under and rising by the side of the floating log, which he mistook for the alligator. He screamed for help, and stake ropes were thrown him, which he seized frantically, to be drawn out, as he thought, from the jaws of death. His disgust was profound when he discovered that he was escaping
only from a rotten log....

We were not alone on the trail. The big drive northward was at its height, and that spring there were probably 500,000 cattle and horses moving up the one universal trail from South Texas. Often we had been driven by angry men, with ferocious dogs, from tract to tract of grazing land, but our movements were so deliberate that the cattle got enough to live upon. The Indian Territory was the cow-puncher’s paradise. Now we would have no more lanes, no more obstructing fences, but one grand expanse of free grass. It was a delightful situation to contemplate.

Our Mexican cook was unfortunate in crossing the Red River. He stopped his wagon in the middle of the stream to fill his water barrel. While he was doing so, the wagon settled to the axles in the yielding quicksands. The oxen were unable to move. Manuel began to beat them with his whip, and the oxen turned quickly to one side, breaking the tongue out of the wagon and leaving it bogged in the river. We went to his rescue and, cutting a cottonwood pole, lashed it with ropes to the broken wagon tongue. But the team could not move it. Finally, after we borrowed two additional yokes of oxen from a neighboring outfit, the six big steers hauled the wagon out of the river. A dried cowhide suspended under the wagon like a hammock and known as the caboose or possum-belly held kindling wood, stake pins for our horses, and other implements for use on the trail. All of the contents that would float were lost, drifting away upon the reddish waters of the river....
Chapter Four

GEAR AND TECHNIQUES: THE HOW OF IT

The gear and techniques of the vaquero define the culture of the cowboy in many ways. As this gear was adapted to moving herds of cattle from Texas north to Montana it necessarily evolved to fit the different demands and climates it found. It often retained its Spanish nomenclature, although on occasion the Spanish has become anglicized almost beyond recognition. As time goes by the anglicized terms tend to obscure the origin of the words, and thereby the history of the activity as well. When one unravels the words, the true extent of the continuing vaquero influence can be appreciated.¹

PERSONAL GEAR

Virtually every element of the vaquero’s personal gear or “get-up” corresponded to some aspect of his work. If something were nonfunctional at least it did not impede him. Both the cowboy and the vaquero wore basic cotton and/or wool shirts and trousers, camisas and pantalones, respectively. Pantalones were often reinforced with leather at stress points to get them to last a little longer against the constant friction of the saddle. A common bandana or bufanda was worn around the neck and had myriad uses, from keeping dust out of the nose and mouth to serving as a bandage or tourniquet in emergency. To help shed rain he packed a slicker, known sometimes as a duster, or to the vaquero as a poncho or perhaps a sarape. Riding boots were largely a later development from the point of view of the vaquero; he often rode barefoot. Trailing cattle to the cold north cer-
tainly had an impact on this approach. Of course a hat was standard gear, and therein lies a bit of the history of the West.

The sombrero, that which makes sombra, or shade, was in many ways the single item of clothing that the vaquero would have a hard time without, and the one to which he formed personal attachment. Its broad brim served to keep the sunlight out of his eyes early and late, and keep the sun in general off during the long mid-day hours. Rain ran off it, and hail bounced off it. When it got cold the brim could be folded down to cover the ears in an attempt to ward off frostbite. In a pinch he could use it to fan a fire or fill it with water for his horse. He might use it to haze a horse or throw in the face of an angry bull as a distraction. In short, it came in handy. Occasionally a chin strap, un barbequejo, was used to help retain the hat in windy weather. The word barbequejo, interestingly enough, is also used to describe the underside of the jaw of a horse—right where a hat strap would go if the horse were to wear one.

Hat styles changed over time and the course of migrating from Texas to Montana, sometimes according to style but more likely because of utilitarian concerns. The high peaked sombrero offered a bit more ventilation for the top of the head—
a real consideration in hot country. Similarly the extended brims offered greater relief from the sun. These broad brims and high peaks were moderated as the cowboy faced the wind of the Great Plains, resulting in headgear with a tighter profile; the modified crown is known as a "Montana Peak." (figure 5).

No mention of hats in the West is complete without mention of John B. Stetson. Stetson went west as a young man and soon identified a market for a sturdy broad-brimmed hat that could take the rough conditions and inclement weather. The Mexican straw hat had too much surface area; the cheap wool hat couldn't hold its shape and sometimes its brim flopped in the face of the cowboy at just the wrong moment. Even less desirable was the crudely-made hide hat that literally disintegrated in the rain. Stetson manufactured a sturdy felt hat that held its shape and actually got tougher as time went by. The hat was an absolute success, perhaps best seen by the fact that another name for a hat in the West is Stetson; but then again, so is sombrero.

Another important garment was the leg protection known as chaparejos or chaparreras—shortened in English to chaps (figure 6). The Spanish root of this term is revealed in the pronunciation as “shaps,” thus preserving a bit of the Spanish sound and the etymology appears to be from a combination of factors. Chaparejos finds its root in the verb chapar, which means to plate or to cover with a veneer. In what appears to be only a serendipitous circumstance, one word for the thick, brushy growth found in the Southwest is chaparral. Of course neither the vaquero nor the cowboy was worried about any of this. His concern was to protect his legs from thorns and tough brush, and the ability of his chaparejos to do the job was of more interest.

The original vaquero-style chaps were more like a blacksmith's apron that hung down along his legs. These loose garments, called armas or armitas, provided some protection from the brush. One account, and it seems reasonable enough, suggests that armas got their start as vaqueros, going about their business in the
hide-and-tallow trade, rode in with cowhides draped over their saddles and soon found that the hide provided them with protection from the ubiquitous thorns. The chaparejos of the vaquero were modified for the trail drives, becoming fuller and heavier as they went north. Chaps for colder country were often constructed of hide with the hair on to provide additional warmth and water repellency. Chaparejos, like other aspects of the gear, were and still are sometimes decorated with small shell-shaped silver ornaments called conchas.

WORKING GEAR

One interesting way of looking at the gear of the vaquero is to start by examining a technique that has become obsolete, the use of the lance. In the early days of the Mexican cattle culture, the wild longhorns were rounded up for branding and to help make them more tractable. These roundups, or rodeos, were accomplished
from horseback by the use of a long lance as a prod to help sort cattle and turn them in the desired direction. This use of the lance was also prevalent in herding techniques in Spain.

The lance was turned into a highly specialized tool as the hide-and-tallow trade developed in the mid-sixteenth century. Partially because of the problem created by hundreds and thousands of carcasses concentrated in one place, it was somewhat less than desirable to bring cattle to a central location for slaughter and skinning. In this situation the *vaquero* used his *desjarretadera* to drop a cow in its tracks. The *desjarretadera* was essentially a hocking knife, called a *luna* for its semi-circular shape, attached to the end of the lance. The *vaquero* would select his target, ride after it, and, when close enough, thrust the blade against the back of the leg, thus severing the large tendon (figure 7). In the best scenario, the *vaquero* would then dismount and finish the animal with another thrust of the knife, probably severing its spinal cord.

While the use of the *desjarretadera* may strike us as cruel, it was the efficiency of the tool rather than its lack of humanitarian attributes that led to its demise. *Vaqueros* were able to slaughter far more cattle in a day than had been previously possible. Unfortunately it made killing and maiming cattle almost too easy. It be-
came a form of amusement to simply hamstring the cattle, particularly of a disliked neighbor, and leave them to die on the ground. And more than one vaquero became desjarretado when, as a result of an argument or skirmish, the lance was turned on him. In 1574 the use of the desjarretadera was banned by the cattle ranchers, although the use of the tool probably continued for sometime after this.

It is at about this same time that we see the ascendancy of the la reata and el lazo, anglicized into lariat and lasso respectively. For all of the efficiency of the desjarretadera, it did have drawbacks as a tool. For one thing, the selection of an animal by means of the desjarretadera was permanent; a rope could be removed. The rope was also handy for holding animals temporarily, as for branding operations. La reata could also be coiled and hung on the saddle when not in use; carrying the desjarretadera was cumbersome on long rides. As a result la reata soon became the primary tool of the vaquero, and his ability to throw a loop soon became legendary. As an old-time Texan was to say later, a cowboy "could do anything but eat with his rope."³

While the rope did develop to the point of being the primary tool, its first uses by vaqueros seem rudimentary by today's standards. Before the lazo began to be
thrown it was placed over the horns of a bull or cow by means of the lance or a long stick. The animal was sometimes then tied to the horse's tail in order to be led to the corral or to the branding fire (figures 8 and 9). As you might imagine, this practice could be disastrous: Flanks were gored by impatient longhorns; tails were torn out by recalcitrant ones.

The lariat itself could be constructed of various materials, including grass and braided horse hair, although these were generally too light for throwing and capturing cattle. The common material for the lariat of a working vaquero was braided untanned cowhide. A rope could also be called a maguey (anglicized to McGav) when made from the fiber of the century plant. Another name for a rope was mecate; this rope was made of hair and wore the anglicized name McCarty; it was generally used for hackamores and lead ropes.

The length of the rope used as a lariat was often around fifty feet, giving the vaquero more options for use. A lasso is made by forming a small loop, una
honda or hondoo, at one end of the rope and threading the other end through it. This gives the roper a lazo of variable size as well as one that cinches down on the animal. As the use of la reata became more sophisticated, the delicate matter of placing the lazo over the heads of the cattle gave way to throwing the loop, or lassoing the cattle. As one might imagine, 800 pounds of longhorn on one end of la reata requires something more substantial than a man who probably weighed well under 150 lbs. on the other end; let’s leave that longhorn a moment while we talk about something to tie him to.

**SADDLES**

The use of saddles on horses dates from at least the fourth or fifth century B.C. While the first riders certainly rode bareback, a man soon found himself to be more adept at most tasks when seated more securely on the horse. This security was achieved by two important technological advances: the saddle itself and stirrups. The contour of the saddle held a rider erect, and the stirrups provided a way for him (and it generally was a him) to brace himself and use his strength efficiently. The stirrup, variously credited to the second century B. C. horsemen of China or the Indies, remains central in horse use today.

There were two styles of riding in fifteenth century Spain. The first, called a la brida was essentially the style of the knights of old, and featured a heavily padded silla de montar, or saddle, and long stirrups. While this style was good for jousting, it was not good for the many maneuvers that the soldier would be called upon to execute in the invasions of the New World.

The second style of riding was Moorish in origin and known as a la jineta. This style featured a lighter saddle with short stirrups and a high cantle. When the horse
galloped the rider stood in the saddle with his legs flexed and the small of his back pressed into the cantle. This position "locked" him and allowed him multiple uses of his torso and upper body. It was highly effective for the mounted conquistador and both Mexico and Peru were conquered by men riding "a la jineta."³

In general it is accurate to say that the vaquero or Mexican saddle was a minimal saddle, an adaptation from the jineta school of riding. It was light and simple, partially for the hot climate and partially for the vaquero's work style. As the cowboy culture made acquaintance with this saddle, and as the saddle moved north along the cattle trails, it became heavier and more suited to roping. Modifications were made to help the rider do his job and to help both the horse and the rider be more comfortable in all-day riding situations. The addition of a substantial horn, a rear cincha, as well as a larger skirt or basto all added bulk and weight to the silla.

The jineta style of riding also provided a very effective position from which to throw la reata. The saddles of the vaqueros soon sprouted a "horn" in front to hold roped livestock; it also continues to serve as a place to hang a riding whip or quirt (from the Spanish cuerda for cord) and to tie off the lead rope. While this appurtenance is probably the single most salient feature of the western saddle today, it is also one whose Spanish name, la comadre, (the godmother) has not carried over into English usage. None the less, it should be noted that to grab the horn (agarrar la comadre) when experiencing difficulty in staying on a horse was no shame. Here one can see that the name comadre is an apt one, as the godmother is one who presents herself as a helper in a time of trouble.

Now that we have a saddle, let's tie off that longhorn that we roped a couple of pages back. In the early days there were two ways to go about this procedure.⁹ One way, associated with the cowboy culture, was to start the whole process with the lariat already tied to the horn. This technique allowed the rider to pay more attention to his horse and to holding the reins, something the less-skilled rider needed
to do. The downside of this approach could be somewhat abrupt. As the rope was tied fast, there was no way to give a little slack should the situation call for it, and the rider could be “jerked down” rather abruptly. In the worst case, the saddle would also be jerked from the body of the horse and the lassoed livestock would drag it off into the prairie, perhaps never to be seen again.

The vaquero tie-off technique, dar la vuelta, involved taking a couple of turns or twists of the rope around the comadre; this allowed him to let la riata slip a little if a bull became ornery or if the situation was such that some immediate slack was needed. This method required more skill with the horse, as the rider had to depend upon el caballo to make the right moves. The cowboys of Texas worked the phrase until it became take a dally, or simply dally. The downside of being a “dally” man was that occasionally the rope would play out at such speed that it burned the skin of the hand. A worse scenario existed as well: A roper’s thumb could get caught in the turns of the rope and be pinched off as the rope went taut between the horse and the bull.

Two of the most commonly used Spanish terms associated with the saddle are latigo and cinch, or el látilgo and la cincha. The látilgo is a leather strap that goes through the metal rings located on the side of the saddle as well as on the end of the cincha, or girth. Technically it is simply the end of a leather strap that goes through any buckling device; the lead end of a waist belt may be properly called a látilgo, and the fact that one “cinches” one’s belt is owed to the Spanish as well.

The placing of the cincha in relationship to the saddle was a regional preference and any hand worth his salt could tell where another was from based on the cinch system on his saddle. The vaquero culture was firmly “centerfire,” while cowboys generally rode “rimfires” or “double-rigged” saddles. Each saddle had advantages and disadvantages related to its use. The “centerfire,” featuring a single cincha, had to be constantly adjusted, as this single strap would loosen easily. On the other hand, dismounting and adjusting a saddle did give the horse a break and
help prevent saddle sores. The "rimfire" seldom need adjustment, and its two-point attachment to the horse provided a stronger base for the "tie man" to anchor his rope. The downside was that a cowboy might ride his horse all day without adjusting the saddle. Many a sore was rubbed up in this manner. It should be noted that modern western saddles are almost entirely of the double cinch variety; improvements in design have made this a comfortable as well as stable saddle.

The stirrups, los estribos, also showed regional differences, and the vaquero-style closed stirrup is still called by the Spanish word tapadera today. Functioning like a fender, la tapadera is a leather covering over the front of the stirrup to prevent the foot from coming into contact with brush and thorns. This shield evolved from earlier days when the vaquero, due to his poverty and the simple lack of foot wear, often rode barefoot. As the riding boot became more common, the need for las tapaderas diminished. While the evolution of the western riding boot has taken place largely within the confines of the English language, it is interesting to note that the style of boot that features a squared toe was developed at least in part to allow the boot a snugger fit inside la tapadera.\(^\text{13}\)

Perhaps a word about spurs should be said here. While I could find no Spanish
nomenclature associated with spurs as such, a common type of spur was known as a Mexican or Spanish spur. This type featured large rotating disks, called rowels, with sharp protruding ends. While the appearance of the Mexican spur was perhaps vicious, in fact, if not sharpened or used incorrectly, it was not a damaging instrument (figure 10). Generally speaking, the more points on a spur and the larger the spur, the more humane. Cowboys and vaqueros who loved their horses, and most of them did, filed the points blunt on their spurs.¹⁴

Before we turn our attention to the gear worn on the horse's head, we should note several lesser known terms that survive with the saddle itself. These words are found in books written in English in this century, but the terms have largely disappeared from common usage at least in Montana.¹⁵ The leather flaps that lie between the inside of the rider's legs and the horse itself (the fenders) are called the rosaderos. The word mochila refers to a saddle bag. The anglicized word alforki, from alforjas, refers to the a cargo saddle. A tailpiece that extends beyond the cantle to cover the back of the horse is called an anquera. The layered skirt that underlies the saddle is called a basto; the sudadero is a thin layer of leather in that system. In short, even if some words have been all but lost, it is safe to say that much Spanish terminology has stayed with the saddle, and that most of it is still quite common.

GEAR ON THE HEAD OF THE HORSE

For a non-cowboy, unraveling the mystery of the gear on the head of a horse is no mean feat. Yet if the principles of the gear are kept in mind it becomes easier. It is safe to say that the purpose of the gear, or tack more properly, is to control the horse. This is a bit of a simplification because many cues to control are delivered through other means (voice, leg pressure, etc.) Nevertheless, the primary control
devices are those attached to the tack that is strapped and tied to the head of the horse (figure 11).

A hackamore is a rope halter having reins and a lead rope. This term has linguistic roots that stretch back to the Arabic word shakima, having to do with a style of bridle. The Moors undoubtedly brought this word along with them to Spain, where it became xáquima in Old Spanish. In the Americas it became jáquima, and from its contact with American cowboys and the English language, hackamore. A synonymous Spanish term is cabestro, although this signifies construction by means of a hair rope, or mecate.

A hackamore is generally coupled with a noseband or a bosal, from the Spanish bozal. A bosal is a noseband that is used with a hackamore as a control system on the horse. It relies on pressure placed on the underside of a horse’s chin, in the area of the barbequejo, and can also reduce the air a horse gets by closing off its mouth and nostrils. An additional rope called a fiadora is sometimes tied to the bosal to help maintain its position. The word fiadora was anglicized to theodore, and is still a recognizable term today. The hackamore combined with a bosal can be used in breaking horses and getting them ready for a bit.
The business of the bit is interesting because there is an actual bit style known throughout the West as “Spanish” or “Mexican.” In truth it is a spade bit (so-named because its shape resembles a shovel) but it picked up the names “Spanish” and “Mexican” because many of the riders using this bit style were vaqueros. The spade bit has a reputation of being a cruel and inhumane device, as it certainly can be when used improperly. A rider can sever a horse’s tongue with a spade bit if he does not handle the reins with restraint. The rider who uses a spade bit properly must be an expert rider, as the vaqueros were, and must have trained his horse to respond to a light touch on either side of the neck for turning. The bit itself functions on the level of a threat. Just the barest touch was all a good rider ever used on his spade bit, and that brought instant response. Remember in the vaquero business, when riding hard and roping, that an instant stop by the horse could prove to be a life saver. A good vaquero prided himself on his ability to ride a spade bit.

One other term associated with the bridle and reins that is still common today is romal, from the Spanish ramal. Ramal means literally a branch road, or a ramification. A romal is a binding (or fortifying) of the two reins as they branch together at the saddle into a lash or a whip. The result, the romal, can serve in place of the quirt and was always in the hands of the rider, at least if he used the closed-rein system. Many riders, however, preferred to hold each side of the reins separately, which also allowed them to tie the horse with the reins and reduced the need for a lead rope.

In summary, it is interesting to see how the language of men who put horses on ships thousands of miles away and hundreds of years ago can still be heard in a land that wasn’t even known to exist at the time. It is also intriguing to see how that language broke out of its cultural borders in the American Southwest and wound up in Montana, some 2,000 miles to the north, because, at least on one level, of a taste for beef in the cities of the Eastern United States.
1. My approach in researching the terminology was to use older books generally, as I felt they would be more comprehensive and authentic. There are two outstanding texts by Ramon F. Adams that I have relied on extensively for much of the material concerning Spanish words of the West. They are Cowboy Lingo (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1936) and Western Words (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1945). Serving to corroborate Mr. Adams was A Dictionary of Spanish Terms in English by Harold W. Bentley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932). This text is a virtual synopsis of the Spanish-Anglo history of the Southwest.


3. Adams, Western Words, 55.

4. Adams, Western Words, 55.

5. Beatie, Russel H., Saddles (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981) 20. Primitive saddles dating to this era were found in the burial graves of central Asian nomads near Pazryryk.

6. This lack of a saddle seemed to have little effect on the American Indian, however, who seemed to have a natural affinity for the animal and a bare-back riding ability to match.


10. The reader is urged to look at the paintings of Charley Russell for numerous illustrations of this effect. See particularly Jerked Down for a view of the complications that arise when a “tie man” gets into a tight spot.

11. Worcester, 75. Worcester includes an anecdote that involves cinching one’s belt a little tighter in place of the evening meal. This was to known to the cowboys as a Spanish supper.

12. James, Will, Cowboys North and South (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925) 14-17.


15. The words are found in the books cited in Note 1. The admittedly unscientific approach to deciding on their currency was done by interviewing two saddle experts: Dave Fish, a custom saddle maker and saddle repair specialist at Dave Fish Saddlery, Missoula, Montana, on July 27, 1994; and Kathy Ogarek at Western Outfitters, also in Missoula, on July 26, 1994. Both of these knowledgeable individuals took the time to explain some of the intricacies of horse tack to the writer.

16. The art of tying a fiadora is disappearing from the horse culture as is the knot itself. If you visit Dave Fish, he'll tie one for you.
Looking Further

Suggested Readings

See Looking Further at the end of the previous chapter.

Suggested Lines of Enquiry

1. Carefully examine the paintings and drawings of Charlie Russell and other authentic western artists. Try to identify the details of the cowboy’s dress as well as the tack on the horses and the equipment being used.

2. Find out as much as you can about the evolution of the hat in the West. Visit a local western wear store and interview a knowledgeable clerk.

3. Identify western place names of Spanish origin. Start with a border state like Arizona or Texas and work your way north to Montana. What happens to these names as you do? Why might that be?

4. Look into the history of the saddle. Visit a local tack shop and interview a saddle maker about the history of the saddle and the Spanish/Mexican influence on that development.
Gear

Origin and Influences

ACROSS
3 strap to tighten
4 pronounced "shaps"
5 shaft-mounted hocking knife
7 shade maker
9 a loop
10 stirrup cover
11 end of a leather strap

DOWN
1 a saddle in English
2 called a hackamore in English
4 known as a quirt in English
6 a fender between leg and horse
8 rope
“The Story of the Cowpuncher”

(Excerpted from the Charles M. Russell story in Trails Plowed Under, New York, Doubleday, 1937)

“Speakin’ of cowpunchers,” says Rawhide Rawlins, “I’m glad to see in the last few years that them that know the business have been writin’ about ‘em. It begin to look like they’d be wiped out without a history. Up to a few years ago there’s mighty little known about cows and cow people. It was sure amusin’ to read some of them old stories about cowpunchin’. You’d think a puncher grewed horns an’ was haired over.

“It put me in mind of the eastern girl that asks her mother: ‘Ma,’ says she, ‘do cowboys eat grass?’ ‘No dear,’ says the old lady, ‘they’re part human, an’ I don’t know but the old gal had ‘em sized up right. If they are human, they’re a separate species. I’m talkin’ about the old-time ones, before the country’s strung with wire an’ nesters had grabbed all the water, an’ a cowpuncher’s home was big. It wasn’t where he took his hat off, but where he spread his blankets. He ranged from Mexico to the Big Bow River of the north, an’ from where the trees get scarce in the east to the old Pacific. He don’t need no iron hoss, but covers his country on one that eats grass and wears hair. All the tools he needed was saddle, bridle, quirt, hackamore, an’ rawhide riatta or seagrass rope; that covered his hoss.

“The puncher himself was rigged, startin’ at the top, with a good hat—not one of the floppy kind you see in pictures, with the rim turned up in front. The top-cover he wears holds its shape an’ was made to protect his face from the weather; maybe to hold it on, he wore a buckskin string under the chin or back of the head. Round his neck a big silk handkerchief, tied loose, an’ in the drag of a trail herd it was drawn over the face to the eyes, hold-up fashion, to protect the nose an’ throat from dust.
In old times, a leather blab or mask was used the same. Coat, vest, an’ shirt suits his own taste. Maybe he’d wear California pants, light buckskin in color, with large brown plaid, sometimes foxed, or what you’d call reinforced with buck or antelope skin. Over these came his chaparejos or leggin’s. His feet were coverd with good high-heeled boots, finished off with steel spurs of Spanish pattern. His weapon’s usually a forty-five Colt’s six-gun, which is packed in a belt, swingin’ a little below his right hip. Sometimes a Winchester in a scabbard, slung to his saddle under his stirrup-leather, either right of left side, but generally left, stock forward, lock down, as his rope hangs at his saddle fork on the right.

“By all I can find out from old, gray-headed punchers, the cow business started in California, an’ the Spaniards were the first to burn marks on their cattle an’ hosses, an’ use the rope. Then men from the States drifted west to Texas, pickin’ up the brandin’ iron an’ lass-rope, an’ the business spread north, east, an’ west, till the spotted long-horns walked in every trail marked out by their brown cousins, the buffalo.

“Texas an’ California, bein’ the startin’ places, made two species of cowpunchers; those west of the Rockies rangin’ north, usin’ centerfire or single-cinch saddles, with high fork an’ cantle; packed a sixty or sixty-five foot rawhide rope, an’ swung a big loop. These cow people were generally strong on pretty, usin’ plenty of hoss jewelry, silver-mounted spurs, bits, an’ conchas; instead of a quirt, used a romal or quirt braided to the end of the reins. Their saddles were full stamped, with from twenty-four to twenty-eight-inch eagle-bill tapaderos. Their chaparejos were made of fur or hair, either bear, angora goat, or hair sealskin. These fellows were sure fancy, an’ called themselves buccaroos, coming from the Spanish word, vaquero.

“The cowpuncher east of the Rockies originated in Texas and ranged north to the Big Bow. He wasn’t so much for pretty; his saddle was low horn, rimfire, or
double-cinch; sometimes ‘macheer.’ Their rope was seldom over forty feet, for being a good deal in a brush country, they were forced to swing a small loop. These men generally tied, instead of taking their dallie-welts, or wrapping their rope around the saddle horn. Their chaparejos were made of heavy bullhide, to protect the leg from brush an’ thorns, with hog-snout tapaderos.

“Cowpunchers were mighty particular about their rig, an’ in all the camps you’d find a fashion leader. From a cowpuncher’s idea, these fellers was sure good to look at, an’ I tell you right now, there ain’t no prettier sight for my eyes than one of those good-lookin’, long-backed cowpunchers, sittin’ up on a high-forked, full-stamped California saddle with a live hoss between his legs.

“Of course a good many of these fancy men were more ornamental than useful, but one of the best cow-hands I ever knew belonged to this class. Down on the Gray Bull, he went under the name of Mason, but most punchers called him Pretty Shadow. This sound like an Injun name, but it ain’t. It comes from a habit some punchers has of ridin’ along, lookin’ at their shadows. Lookin’ glasses are scarce in cow outfits, so the only chance for these pretty boys to admire themselves is on bright, sunshiny days. Mason’s one of these kind that doesn’t get much pleasure out of life in cloudy weather. His hat was the best; his boots was made to order, with extra long heels. He rode a center-fire, full-stamped saddle, with twenty-eight-inch tapaderos; bearskin ancaroes, or saddle pockets; his chaparejos were of the same skin. He packed a sixty-five-foot rawhide. His spurs an’ bit were silver inlaid, the last bein’ a Spanish spade. But the gaudiest part of his regalia was his gun. It’s a forty-five Colt’s, silverplated an’ chased with gold. Her handle is pearl, with a bull’s head carved on.

“When the sun hits Mason with all this silver on, he blazes up like some big piece of jewelry. You could see him for miles when he’s ridin’ high country. Barrin’ Mexi-
cans, he’s the fanciest cow dog I ever see, an’ don’t think he don’t savvy the cow. He knows what she says to her calf. Of course there wasn’t many of his stripe. All punchers like good rigs, but plainer; an’ as most punchers ‘re fond of gamblin’ an’ spend their spare time at stud poker or monte, they can’t tell what kind of a rig they’ll be ridin’ the next day. I’ve seen many a good rig lost over a blanket. It depends how lucky the cards fall what kind of a rig a man’s ridin’.

“I’m talkin’ about old times, when cowmen were in their glory. They lived different, talked different, an’ had different ways. No matter where you met him, or how he’s rigged, if you’d watch him close he’d do something that would tip his hand...”
Chapter Five

Cowboys and Conquistadors

“What is going on in their heads?”
“What are they thinking of?”
“What in the world can make them think like that?”

Comments like these are often heard among high school teachers as they observe the always interesting and often bizarre worlds of their students. Some days it’s like watching an entirely different species: What could be the impetus for behaviors that border the incomprehensible to most adults? Kids in Manhattan, Montana, show up at school dressed like Jimi Hendrix. Others sport garish tattoos on the areas of skin unembroidered by body piercing. More “mainstream” students idolize sports heroes to the point of absurdity, spending hundreds of dollars on Michael Jordan (now Shaquille O’Neal, next year who knows who?) paraphernalia. The tremendous irony of young white males virtually worshiping the prowess of the current black basketball superstar itself deserves a separate study. From where does this bizarre behavior come? Where do they get these ideas?

A significant percentage of teenage behavior can be chalked up to hormones, of course, but that doesn’t explain everything. Part of their behavior range is also explained by teenage rebellion, another natural and healthy phenomenon. But the aspect that interests me has to do with the origins of their ideas. Hormones may be at the root of everything from hickey to unplanned parenthood, but thus has it been for generations. Rebellion is as necessary for most of them to move from the nest to the limb as it was for me, that too seems to be a part of life. But where do
the specific trappings of their behaviors originate? Why, for this generation, do we see a bizarre juxtaposition of sports worship and a 1960’s reprise, with a dash of punk cyber-grunge thrown in for flare?

The answer, of course, is the human condition of the nineties known as wiredness. Our children are tapped into a whirling world of images where most of the linear processes that manifested the images are hidden or obscured, not unlike a computer “desktop” with one file lying open on top of the previous two or three windows. In other words, the “obvious” contradictions of a young person dressed in running shoes and athletic gear while puffing on a cigarette are only contradictions to those of us old enough to see the interconnectedness of things as an intricate yet mostly manageable puzzle, rather than an incomprehensible array of images in a house of mirrors.

At this point it would be fair to ask what all this has to do with cowboys and conquistadors. The answer to this question provides me with the opportunity to speculate on some intriguing things I’ve learned about these two groups of men and their places in history. The scenario I relate above helps make a simple point. The external actions of human beings are often a reflection of their internal landscapes—of who they are inside. In the case of our youth today, obviously in greater or lesser degree, much of this internal landscape consists of whirling disconnected images—a schizophrenic kaleidoscope of slo-mo slam dunks and M-TV frenzy. The reason we as adults have a hard time understanding them on occasion is that we are simply not on the same page as they are; to use a metaphor they might better relate to, one could say that we’re “not in the same movie.” When we ask questions like those posited at the beginning of this essay, the lack of corresponding features in our own internal make-up becomes obvious..
Similarly, when we look back in history, we often find actions that we cannot understand. And generally the reason we can't understand them has to do with the fact that our internal landscapes are so much different from those we are studying. We can no more comprehend their world from our point of view than they could comprehend our day from their own place in time and space. To understand kids today it helps if one watches at least a little M-TV as well as an hour of televised sport every week. It provides shared landscape and a common perspective from which to view and discuss other, more important, matters. Similarly, to have an understanding of the worlds of the American cowboy or the Spanish conquistador, an understanding of what was going on in their heads can provide an insight into who they were or why they behaved as they did in certain circumstances. This process is a good deal more complex than sitting down to a music video or a basketball game on ESPN; fortunately it is also more rewarding. I believe that cowboys and conquistadors shared a few significant chunks of internal landscape. What follows is an attempt to map that territory.

Who were the men who made up the groups of people that have become known as "cowboys" and "conquistadors"? It needs to be noted that there was no single group of men in either era that comprised the sum total or cowboys or conquistadors. Both groups of men contained several generations and existed in various regions of the Americas. None-the-less, careful generalizations can be made by looking at specific groups of each.

Let's start with the conquistadors. According to Bernard Grunberg in his article "The Origins of the Conquistadors of Mexico City," the conquistadors, aside from their well-known leaders like Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, were relatively ordinary men of their times. Grunberg's research, based on the earliest
available records, indicate that approximately 2,100 men were involved with the initial conquest of Mexico City, almost half of whom were killed in the attempt, leaving virtually no trace of themselves. There is enough known about the surviving 1212 individuals to draw some general conclusions for purposes of comparison.

The conquerors of Mexico City were primarily from the southwestern regions of Spain, largely from Andalucía, Castilla La Vieja, Castilla La Nueva, and Extremadura. Not all were Spanish; there were Portuguese, Italians, and a few Greeks as well. Most of the men were young, in their twenties and thirties, and about a third were under twenty years of age. There were a few older men as well, some in their forties and fifties; one man was 72 years old. The presence of women was almost nil; few conquistadors had wives. While most of the men were of common birth, perhaps as many as ten percent of them were hidalgos. The percentage of those who ultimately claimed privilege as hidalgos grew as time went by, as there was little that could be done to prove otherwise.

As one looks at the individuals who are recognized in history by the glorious title of conquistador one finds little to distinguish them from their peers. About a third had occupations related to shipping and the sea; another third had been involved in commerce, either as salesmen or craftsmen. About 16% were soldiers; the remainder came from all walks of life: priests, monks, doctors, pharmacists, musicians, and peasants. In short, they were a mixed group of generally younger people who found themselves at the vortex of historical winds that swept the world of their day. Their actions in the New World, while often reprehensible by our standards, are more understandable in the light of what the world looked like to them. To understand is neither to condemn nor condone, it simply allows us to see objectively the impetus for their actions.
While it is relatively easy, thanks to the research of Grunberg, to get a picture of the conquistadors of Mexico City, it is less easy to find definitive information about the early cowboys. A good deal of the difficulty has to do with deciding on who the cowboys were. This involves extracting historical realities from the multi-layered cultural phenomenon that emerges when the word *cowboy* is spoken. Were they the men and boys who trailed cows to market in the Northeast and later in the coastal Carolinas? Were they the *vaqueros* of Mexico and California who herded cattle around the Southwest? Were they the early “Texians” who moved west with Sam Houston in the early part of the nineteenth century? Were they the black, white, and Mexican men and boys who drove cattle north to Miles City, Montana, and beyond in the 1870’s and 1880’s? Yes, all these were cowboys in at least one sense of the word; that is, they all lived a life in which cattle played a large part. The further one looks for the definitive American cowboy the more the image diversifies. The historical cowboy for purposes of this comparison can be drawn from the group of men and boys skilled in the worlds of horses and cattle that coalesced in Texas after the Civil War.

Several salient similarities emerge when the two groups are compared. Both are virtually all-male societies. Both groups are predominantly young. Both lived their lives as strangers in a strange land, although this is more true for the Spanish in the Americas than for the American cowboy, even though he spent much of his time in the “new country” of the Great Plains. Both groups suffered extreme hardship and death in the line of duty. Both groups of men were, by necessity, self-sufficient and proud of their abilities. Both loved and respected the horse, a feature that is perhaps too easily overlooked. Cowboys and conquistadors both owed their very lives to their mounts and they were fully aware of it. Perhaps never has symbiosis been so vital. Both groups were made up of common men who found themselves in an
extraordinary time, and who rose to the occasion.

It is well known that the conquistadors marched under the banner of “Gold, Glory, and Gospel.” While the cowboys had no similarly formalized motto they did operate under a loosely defined set of dictates that have become known as the Code of the West. It is interesting to see the similarities of these two value systems. A good way to do this is examine the “Gold, Glory and Gospel” motto with the American cowboy in mind. Some intriguing comparisons emerge.

Let’s start with gold. Contrary to the commonly-held conception, the lust for gold was not simply one of unrestrained greed and avarice on the part of the Spaniards. Irving J. Leonard in his classic study *Books of the Brave* explains that the Spanish economy of the day was dependent upon gold because of its liquidity and ease of exchange. Spain was then, and to some degree remains today, a relatively non-productive land from an agricultural perspective. In the days of the conquistador its isolation was even greater, with few and lengthy trade routes. As a result, Spain pursued mineral wealth, which allowed it to trade with nations whose economic bases were more diversified and who could offer a range of goods for the gold. When seen from this perspective, it is easier to understand the constant demand for gold and silver that the conquistadors made upon the peoples of the Americas. The gold was not an object in and of itself then; rather it provided the Spanish with the means to fulfill their needs.

Payday for the cowboy had some similarities to that of the conquistador. While the cultural myth of the cowboy contains many false dimensions, one that seems to be true has to do with his wealth—or more accurately, his lack thereof. While a few cowboys parlayed their efforts and small cattle herds (often rustled) into large holdings and significant wealth, almost all did not. Cowboys were not known to
hold onto their wages once they hit town, and the result of years of this practice was, of course, poverty. The image of the broken-down cowboy is one that endures in Montana because it is empirically affirmed often enough to retain its validity. A tour of the Ox or the Stockman's in Missoula, Montana, will confirm this. They viewed their gold (and they were very often paid in gold coin) as a highly liquid means of exchange for that which they wanted and needed and did not have. Planning for future needs, such a large feature of our internal makeup, was not generally a priority.

The cowboys' wages, like the conquistadors' share of the Aztec gold, more often than not slipped through his fingers. According to Grunberg, "a fair number [of the conquistadors] lost all or part of their personal wealth." These were arguably better off than those that died in the battles for Mexico City, or than the cowboys trampled to death in a stompede, but neither scenario is attractive. Both the cowboy and the conquistador lived a life rich in experience but often severely foreshortened and ultimately bereft of most financial rewards. The "forty-years gatherin's" that a cowboy carried in his bedroll were usually his only possessions, and those of more sentimental value than any other. While there is some irony here, particularly for the conquistador, the fact that many of both groups died poor is a confirmation of the similar philosophies that each bore toward material wealth.

The portions of the belief system that dealt with glory and gospel are perhaps more telling of the internal make-up of the men because it gives a glimpse of the literature, both sacred and secular, that informed their actions. Part of Leonard's thesis in Books of the Brave is that the books the conquistadors read and the stories they were exposed to had much to do with the actions they took and the way they saw the world. His analysis is an intriguing one. Metaphorically speaking, he
puts the conquistador on the psychiatrist’s couch and performs a sort of reverse bibliotherapy, using the books they had read to explain actions they took. In his analysis he shows the world of the conquistador to be similar to the world of his fictional heroes. I think the same can be said for the American cowboy. Both groups lived in the kind of isolation that would allow the fictional to become more real than it might have been in more confined spaces. Moreover, both lacked literary sophistication, thus making them more likely to succumb to the magic of story. Additionally, the literacy rate was not particularly high for either of these groups. The books they had were generally not the high literature of the day, but rather more of the popular vein.

What is interesting is that the popular vein for both of these groups of men included a strong dose of romantic fiction. Both groups essentially read (and had read aloud to them) stories that involved individual male protagonists, mounted on horseback, engaged in dangerous circumstances while questing through unknown territory. In the case of the Spaniards it was novels like Amadis of Gaul and Sergas de Esplandian. These books featured knights questing for tribes of warlike women and unfathomable riches. For the earlier American cowboy it was the works of Cooper and Irving, featuring unschooled yet frontier savvy heroes like Natty Bumpo. Later cowboys were fueled by fictionalized stories about Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. Both the cowboys and the conquistadors were inspired and sustained by these stories, and their realities were very much influenced by them; to put it another way, the fiction was often woven into the fabric of their reality.

A good way to see to what degree this could happen is to look at the text of one of the books read by the conquistadors, Sergas de Esplandian, part of what might be called the Amadis de Gaul series. While the search for gold was always pri-
mary for the conquistadors, the glorious quest for a warlike tribe of women known as Amazons was never out of their heads. The myth of the Amazon women dates back at least to the Greeks, but this was probably not generally known. What was known was that the existence of these women seemed to be verified in the *Amadis* series. Dwelling on the “islands of California” under their Queen Calafia, these women captured the imaginations of the conquistadors. Early maps of the Americas showing California as an island owe as much to this fiction as they do to incomplete surveys of the land. The river that became known as the Amazon clearly reflects the same wishful thinking on the part of early cartographers.

The realm of the fantastic was also a part of a cowboy’s reality, although I think he was more conscious of it than the conquistador had been. This can be seen in the large role that exaggeration had in the story telling of the American West. This device worked well because much of what was being discussed or described was unknown, in much the same fashion as for the conquistadors. The tales of Charley Russell and other story tellers are good examples of an oral literature which relied upon strange and exotic nature of the land for a significant part of its success.

Finally, for both the cowboy and the conquistador, glory was achieved on horseback, often alone, while striving against hostile elements in strange lands. In this kind of circumstance a special kind of god was needed. Here an understanding of Spanish history is helpful to get a sense of who the conquistadors were. Leonard points out that the Spanish had been hardened by years of hand-to-hand conflict with the infidel, and that his eventual triumph over the Turk gave him a sense of himself as an instrument of God in restoring order to his native land. There is a parallel to the notion of Manifest Destiny here. The cowboy certainly shared in the general belief of the time that it was his right and his duty to bring the untamed wildness of the West to some orderly fruition and to bring the right Word of God to
its pagan inhabitants. Now every cowboy was no more a missionary than every conquistador had been, but they generally operated with notions of the Christian God and his salvation as a backdrop for their actions.

In summary, it is fair to say that the cowboys of the American West and the Spanish conquistadors shared, through fiction, fact, and faith, a good deal of the same internal topography. Not only can the actions and perspectives of both groups be better understood by becoming familiar with the elements that made up these landscapes, but because of the iconic quality of the cowboy in our national psyche we can perhaps understand ourselves better as well.

2. There is some evidence that a few conquistadors had wives that actually made the journey to Mexico. Others, according to Grunberg, were likely to have been mujeres públicas.


4. To my mind Leonard is a bit too much of an apologist for the conquistadors; I personally have a hard time with much of how they treated the people they found when they crossed the Atlantic to the Americas. However, his explanations as to why they thought and acted as they did do ring true to me.

5. Grunberg, 283.


7. There was a series of four of these novels, each relating the continued quest of Amadis in exotic lands and among strange people. Sergas de Esplandián was a sequel to this series. The first of the books was published in 1508 by Garci-Rodríguez de Montalvo in Zaragoza.