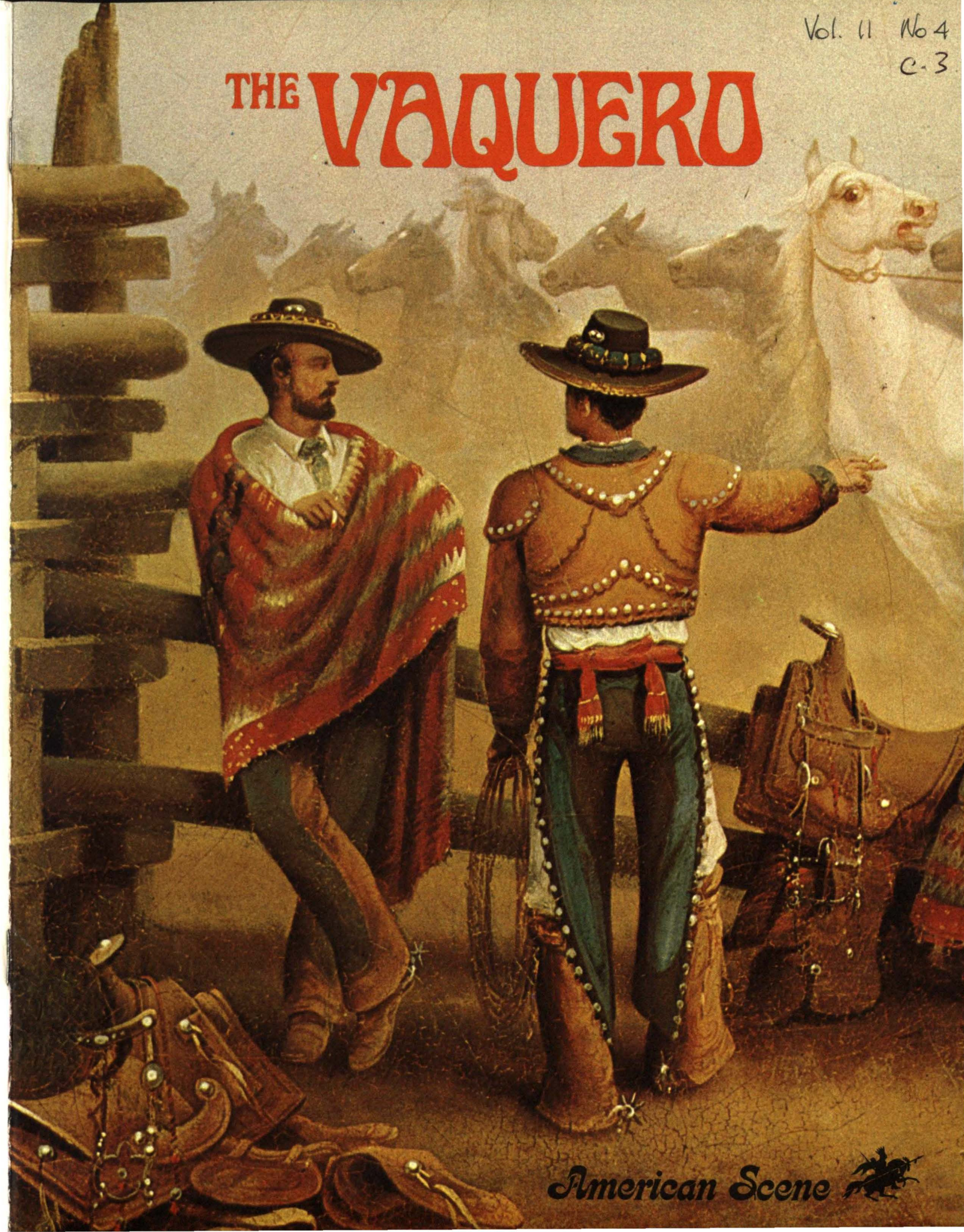




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THE VAQUERO



American Scene 

American Scene

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THE VAQUERO



The Gilcrease collection records many activities of the American cowboy, some well-known, others virtually unknown. To deal with the subject in the Institute's American Scene magazine, two issues will be published. This, the first of the two issues, will deal with the background and emergence of the earliest men to work cattle on country which is now a part of the United States. A later issue will deal with the nineteenth century cowboys of the West. Materials used to prepare and illustrate these issues will be from the Gilcrease collections, some are established favorites and others are relatively obscure pieces. "The Vaquero," featured in this issue, was the earliest American horseman to work cattle; the first American cowboy.

American Scene

WRITTEN BY PAUL A. ROSSI.

Among the men of American history, the cowboy has emerged through fact and fiction to a pinnacle shared by no other single historical character in America. He has been the subject of biographies, novels, short stories, poems, paintings, and motion pictures. He has been occasionally censured, often lied about, most often glorified, but never forgotten.

In the sixteenth century, during the early period of the development of America, herdsmen of the East Coast and Southern states, working cattle without using horses, were the first men on American soil referred to as cowboys. The later Western mounted cowboy was similar to the Early American pedestrian cowboy in name only.

The vaquero, developing in Mexico during the sixteenth century, was a horseman first, a cattle herder second. His methods and equipment were adopted and adapted by both the California vaquero and later by the Texas cowboy. The methods of the California vaquero also had some influence on the Texas cowboy.

Although the terms vaquero and cowboy may seem synonymous, both referring specifically to herdsmen, there were definite differences between the two which are still discussed and argued by old timers, history buffs, and cattlemen.

The American vaquero, of Spanish descent and speech, with Spanish influenced methods of working cattle and concepts of horsemanship, existed during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, primarily in the far western sections of the United States. His activity was restricted to the area west of the Rocky Mountains which included the present states of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Oregon, Washington, and parts of Idaho, Montana, and New Mexico.

The California vaquero, in the setting of rough, isolated frontier country of the California coastline, was as colorful a character as ever stepped from the pages of history. His clothing was distinctive in its brilliance and design. Influenced by the Spanish love of grandeur, his attire was usually made of the best fabrics available and embroidered or trimmed with braid,

tassels, or other forms of decoration. He never walked when he could ride and his horse's equipment was usually as grandly decorated as his own clothing.

The vaquero traditionally wore a short, brilliant jacket which was not designed to be buttoned, but was worn with an open-at-the-neck shirt. These were often attractively decorated with embroidery or braid following the jacket design. He wore knee length pants which buttoned at the seams on the outside of each leg and were secured by a silk sash rather than by a belt or suspenders. Below the short pants he wore "botas," highly decorated leather leg coverings which spanned the area from below his knee to the instep of his foot. Attached to the ornate garter which held the bota, the vaquero wore a scabbard which held a long knife.

The botas, forerunner of fancy, tooled leather cowboy boots, were worn over a soft shoe made of deer skin. The vaquero usually attached pieces of heavy leather to reinforce the heels of his soft shoes to support his heavy hand wrought spurs. The vaquero's spurs were of such enormous size, with rowels often four to five inches in diameter, that it was necessary for them to be removed from his low-heeled shoes whenever he was planning to walk any distance.

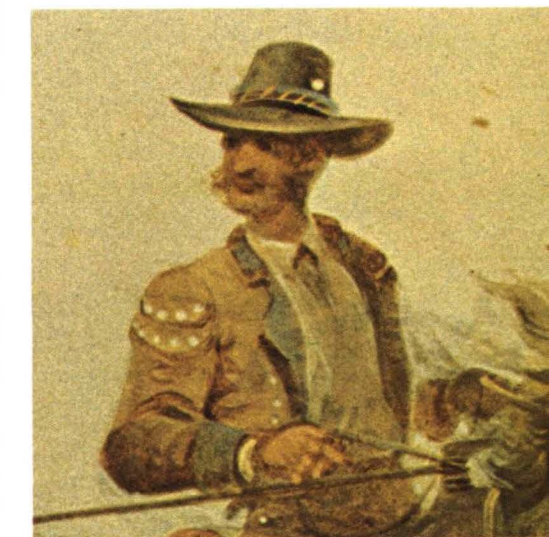
The hat of the vaquero, which changed very little during the half century of his greatest period of activity, was made principally of black felt. A broad-brimmed hat with a rather low crown, the *poblanos* were made in Pueblo, Mexico. The inside of the hat and brim were usually lined with silk. A band on the outer edge of the brim often was made of silver or gold cord and sometimes was decorated with tassels. The band around the crown of the hat displayed even more decoration with gilt or silver thread or colorful silk stitching. The traditional *barbiquejo*, chin strap, was worn loosely under the lower lip or, if worn while riding in the wind, under the chin.

The most important item of the vaquero's costume was his cloak. Called *capa*, *serape*, or *poncho*, the fineness of its material and the ele-



Detail from James Walker's
"Man Lassoing Bear"

Detail from James Walker's "Wild Horses."



gance of its design revealed the rank of its owner. Although the very elite might wear a great circular cape of dark blue or black broadcloth with a gaily decorated smaller cape around the shoulders, the less affluent vaquero usually wore a woven serape, a simple long rectangular garment with a hole in the center for his head.

The vaquero, unlike his later Western counterpart, was usually a married man often having a sizable family. For the most part, the

California vaquero was not a drifter, often remaining with one mission ranch or rancho all his life. Some eventually established their own small ranches which observed the same mixture of work-and-play habits as were observed on the grand ranchos. The vaquero dressed with a flair, lived a life of excitement in his intricate work and boisterous play, and reflected great pride in his speech and manner. He was a gentleman on horseback.



In the early 1500's Spanish explorers to the North American continent, although motivated by desires for the rumored wealth of the new world, unintentionally made valuable contributions to the country which they sought to exploit. Hernando Cortes brought the first horses to the shores of this continent in 1519 when he led a force of several hundred men to invade the land of the Aztecs in Mexico. The establishment of colonies followed the conquest and the Spanish empire was established in America.

Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, following the reports of other Spanish explorers, Cabeza de Vaca and Fray Marcos de Nizza, set out in 1540, seeking the riches of the fabled "seven cities of Cibola." Large herds of cattle and other livestock were required to supply Coronado's entourage of over a thousand which included conquistadores and their native servants. The two year search led the gaily bedecked horsemen and their followers through much of the area which is now the southwestern part of the United States.

Considering the original purpose of Coronado's expedition—to find gold—the mission was a complete failure. However, the side effects were far reaching. The entire area covered by the expedition was claimed for Spain as part of its colonial empire in America. During the following three hundred years, the Spanish life-style with its romantic flair for personal adornment and pageantry of behavior, was copied by the natives. Just as Indian and conquering Spaniard intermingled, their customs and habits also were blended.

Another unintentional contribution made by Coronado's expedition into the Southwest was its introduction of livestock. Those animals contributed to the foundation of the stock raising industry which developed into a major occupation in the area for three centuries and were the basis of the American cattle industry of the middle nineteenth century. These cattle and those which were later brought to this continent



by Spanish colonials were the *Granado Prieto*, a black Spanish cattle, originally Andalusia bred with Moorish cattle during the centuries of the occupation of Spain by the Moors.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, colonists in America were encouraged by the Spanish government in the breeding of the black cattle. Known for their stamina, keen senses, strength and fierceness, these were developed into the fighting bulls of Spain and Mexico. In the nineteenth century, cattle of this same basic breed changed in appearance due to differences of climate and conditions. They developed into the longhorn but retained the instincts and temperament of the early Spanish cattle.

Although there is proof of the existence of prehistoric horses on this continent, those animals had been extinct for hundreds of years before the Spanish arrived. The horses of the Spanish

explorers, first animals of their kind to be seen by the natives of America, were descended from the barb horses which the Moors had ridden during their invasion of Spain in the eighth century. The barbs were the African variety of the equine family, known as the Arabian or oriental horse. Generally larger than the Arabs of the desert, the barbs had fine proportions, elegant, spirited movements, and generally mild, gentle dispositions. Mustangs adapted to and changed by living on the American prairies, were of Spanish Barb descent.

From 1535 to 1821, Mexico was governed by a succession of Spanish viceroys. Under the Spanish Colonial system the viceroys of Mexico possessed all the powers of royalty, checked only by the authority of the *Audiencia*, the court of appeal of Mexico. This group's sanction was necessary to give force of law to decrees issued by the viceroy. The viceroy served as president of the *Audiencia*.

The laws forbade inhabitants of the Spanish Colonial empire to manufacture anything which could be supplied to them by the mother country, Spain. Industrial and material development of the country was hampered by severe restrictions. In addition to these restrictions, heavy taxes were imposed and the people were subjected to an arbitrary government similar to England's colonies.

Although Coronado had not ventured as far west as California, Baja or Vieja California was explored by Melchior Diaz, head of a division of Coronado's expedition. Alta California, north of the Baja peninsula, was explored in 1542 by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, whose companion, Bartolome Ferrelo, made the earliest known charts of sections of that part of the California coastline. During the two centuries which followed, other Spaniards made brief excursions into northern California, however, none chose to settle in the region.

In 1683, small colonial settlements were established in the Baja area by Jesuit missionaries who later were expelled from there by the

government. In the middle of the eighteenth century, motivated by the interest shown in northern California by other foreign nations, Spain encouraged the colonization of Alta California.

In the late 1760's, a Franciscan monk, Father Junipero Serra, and a Spanish soldier, Sergeant Jose Ortega, led the first expedition to found a chain of Catholic missions in upper California. They were accompanied by the Spanish-appointed governor of the Californias, Don Gaspar de Portola.

The Portola Expedition set out from Baja California with a small herd of cattle, horses, and other livestock. Although members of this expedition, which was entirely a religious and military undertaking, remained to establish missions in Alta California, there were no colonists in the group and no women or children. In the following years, both the spiritual and temporal government of the area were entrusted to monks of the order of St. Francis.

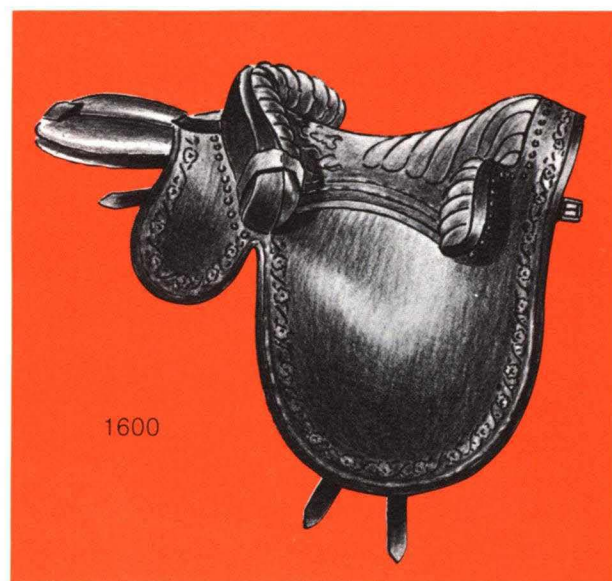
During the decade of the 1770's, Spanish missions and military presidios were established along the coastline of California. About the middle of that decade, Spanish colonials and their families gradually began moving into the region. San Diego, Carmel, San Francisco, San Jose, and Los Angeles were locations where the few scattered pueblos and settlements grew up around religious and military establishments. During the following twenty years, other missions were established in California by various members of the Franciscan order.

Widely scattered missions and presidios had been established earlier in the eighteenth century throughout the area which is now the Southwestern United States from Lower California to Texas. Large herds of cattle had developed on the mission ranches in Texas. It is recorded that the Esprito Santo Mission, established in 1749 near Goliad, Texas, ran more than forty thousand head of cattle by 1775.

The missions of California also developed great herds of cattle and became the hub of



"Wild Horses," reproduction of oil painting by James Walker, from the Gilcrease collection.



much accelerated activity. After they were established in California, the Franciscan friars, who were personally dedicated to an ascetic existence, determined to build their mission ranches and to help the native inhabitants. Their aim was to convert the Indians to Christianity and to civilize them according to Spanish ideas.

At the time of colonization, the region was inhabited by Indians of the Hupa, Mojave, Yuma, Maudu, and Canalino tribes. The Indians' initial association with the newcomers caused them to be subjected to measles, pneumonia, and various other diseases hitherto unknown to the natives. During the early years of this period, adjustments and changes were not easily made by the Indians whose occasional revolts were rapidly suppressed by the soldiers of the presidios.

The mission priests taught the Indians improved methods for clothing and housing themselves, and the basic concepts of agriculture. The primary crops consisted of beans, peppers, melons, wheat, barley, and corn. The priests also helped the Indians to develop their abilities to create crafts which produced items for trade. Although Indians learned many new methods of improving their lives, and developed their skills under the guidance of the mission padres, little time was devoted to formally educating the natives. While several generations of Indians

grew to maturity, few learned to read or write. However, they were encouraged to develop and refine their abilities as horsemen and often surpassed their teachers in these skills.

Although there was a long established law in Spanish colonial Mexico which did not allow an Indian to ride a horse, it was soon apparent that there were not enough Spaniards in California to handle the rapidly growing herds of cattle. Thus, in spite of the possible danger of their training a mounted enemy, the mission priests were forced to ignore the law and teach their Indian recruits the methods of handling cattle from horseback which had been developed over the years by vaqueros in Mexico. Although the earliest Spanish colonists were knowledgeable stockmen, they had soon learned that, in their new environment, new methods had to be adopted for working their cattle on unrestricted ranges. The Mexican vaquero had developed answers to the problems the settlers met.

Thus, in the early 1770's, the California vaquero took to the saddle and became the earliest cowboy in North America. Needing men to work with their herds, the Spanish cattle raisers of California turned for help to the only other men in the region, the native Indians. The vaqueros, skilled horsemen of the American Southwest during the last half century of Spanish control over that region, worked cattle on the mission ranches and on the ranchos of the Spanish aristocrats.

The vaqueros spent many hours developing their roping skills, improving their horsemanship, and training horses. During their off-duty hours, these working cowboys invented games to challenge and develop their skills. As a result of their consuming interest in complicated maneuvers, pieces of equipment were either adapted or developed to meet their needs. The center-fire saddle, hackamore, spade bit, and reata were used, developed, or adapted by the vaqueros.

When the Indians were allowed to become riders of horses as well as the animals' caretakers, their pride caused them to become



excellent trainers. They used great care and patience, usually spending as much as six months to a year working a colt on a *jaquima*, a hackamore, later graduating it to a double rein, before employing the use of a bit. The hackamore, basically a bridle without a bit, in the hands of a loose-reined, patient trainer, would produce a responsive, fast, easy-reining cowhorse. Much of the horse's training, however, followed traditional Spanish military procedures. First receiving training as a cavalry horse, the animal was refined and finished as a cowhorse. The proof of this method was revealed when mounted vaqueros, armed with reatas and lances, faced battle wise American forces and emerged as victors in a battle at San Pasqual in 1846.

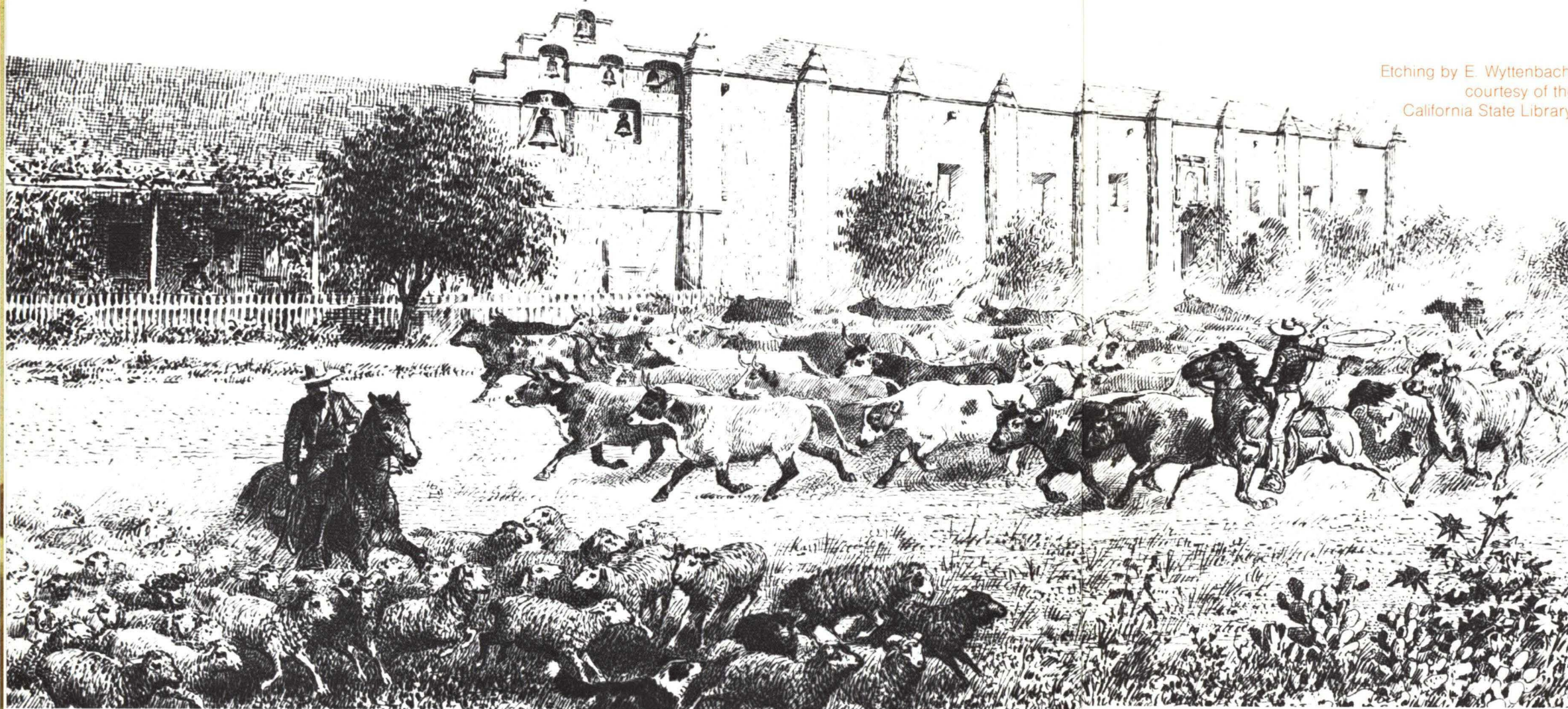
The early Spanish war saddle had long since been discarded for use with cattle and the *silla vaquera*, or Mexican saddle, was developed with a horn which was better adapted to handling wild or half-wild stock. Although many of the saddles of the early part of this period were highly ornate; soft woods, poor grade leather and construction made them inferior for heavy work. This was corrected in later saddles with heavy rigging and large horns. Probably the finest saddles ever produced in North America were developed during the period of 1820 to 1840. Since that time the simple elegance and quality of workmanship has not often been matched.

Among the skills developed by the vaquero through long hours of practice was the use of *las reatas largas*, the long ropes. These braided rawhide reatas were made with four, six, or eight strands and were from sixty to one hundred feet long. It was customary for the vaquero to carry his reata tied on the right or off-side at the back of his saddle. This was a handy position, just behind and below the rider's right hip. The vaquero considered skill and finesse in handling the reata of much greater importance than speed.

"A Native Californian," from *Gleason's Pictorial*, March 13, 1852. Courtesy of the California State Library.



"Horse Corral and Vaqueros," reproduction of oil painting by James Walker, from the Gilcrease collection.



Etching by E. Wyttenbach.
courtesy of the
California State Library.

The vaquero made use of his time by practicing roping techniques on the many mustangs roaming the California ranges. He was a "dally" roper. A "dally man" roped from a long distance, picking his time and playing the animal. He would make a throw, then, while bringing his horse to a stop, make a couple of turns of his reata around the saddle horn. He preferred this method to the reata's being tied "hard and fast" to the saddle horn which was the method used years later in Texas by cowboys using the shorter lariats.

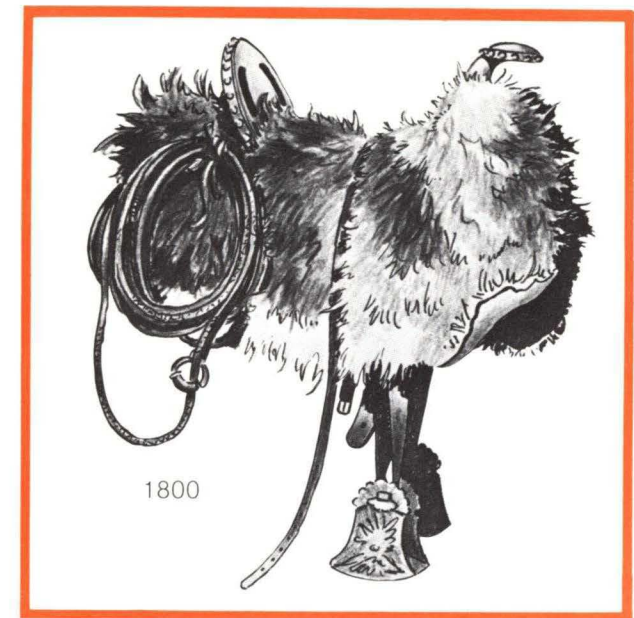
Most early colonists were not wealthy men, but after a few years of their civilizing influence on the region, more affluent and ambitious men began to build extensive holdings and the great ranchos came into existence. During the first decade of the colonization of Alta California, a social distinction became firmly established. The order of prominence was based

upon the amount of Spanish blood in the lineage.

From the time of the conquest of Mexico, the Spanish and Aztec blood lines had been mixed to varying degrees; after more than two centuries, few could claim to be of pure Spanish descent. Most of the elite Spanish colonials who settled in California became the owners of enormous cattle ranches which were worked by the California vaqueros.

From the beginning of the Spanish colonial period in upper California, cattle raising was managed by the Spaniards. Large grants of land for ranchos were awarded to army officers and other favorites of the Spanish monarchs or of the powerful viceroys of Mexico.

Ranches were operated under open range conditions. A large rancho could have thousands of leagues of land, 20,000 or more cattle, several thousand head of horses, sheep and other domestic animals. An operation of this size often



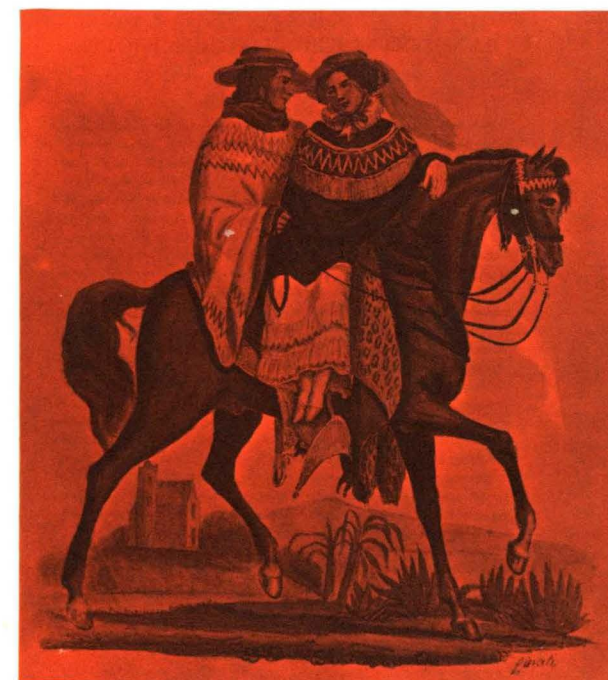
employed as many as two or three hundred people.

Colonial law required each rancher to brand his cattle and horses. By law, he had to start with at least 150 head of cattle. Two brands and ear markings were registered by each rancher: the first was his regular brand, the second, a cancelling brand used when his stock was sold.

White walled haciendas with red tiled roofs were built around central patios with covered verandas. The overseeing of work was liberally interspersed with *fiestas*, celebrations, and *meriendas*, picnics, which were enjoyed by the hacendado, his lady, their neighbors and guests.

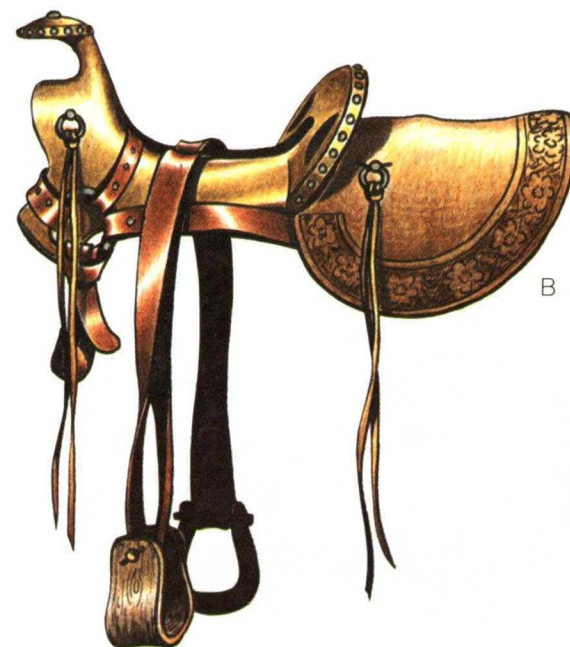
When the gentleman hacendado rode out on an inspection of his holdings, his position and station were made apparent by his personal appearance and by the elegance and grandeur of his horse's trappings and equipment. It was the custom for the hacendado to wear his hair cut short, or if uncut, bound with a silk kerchief. Introduced in about 1830, the Spanish gentlemen adopted long, ornate trousers, held with the traditional Spanish silk sash, buttoned at the outer seams. These were normally left unbuttoned from the knee down to the ankle to provide comfort to the rider on horseback. This practice also exposed the highly decorative leather botas, or leg wrappings, worn with a low-heeled shoe, with a turned up toe.

Color lithograph from the Gilcrease collection of rare prints showing the hacendado and his lady.





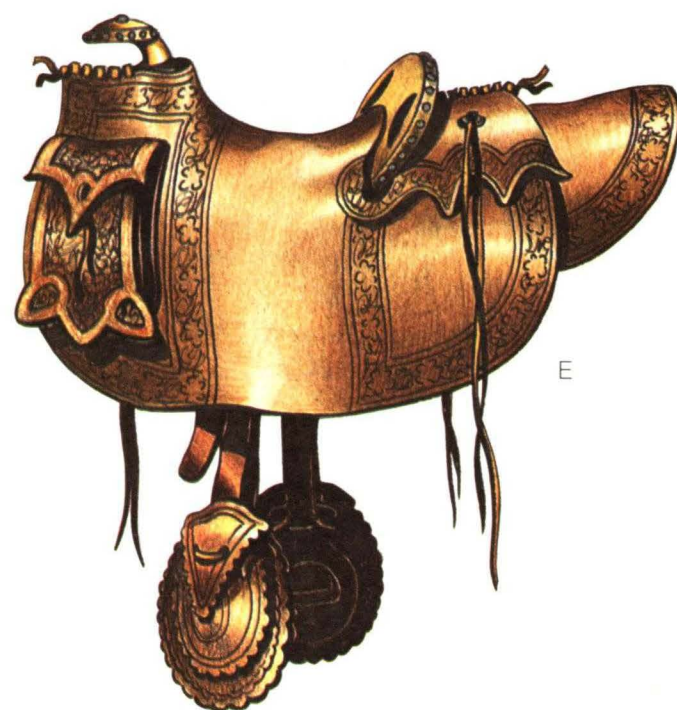
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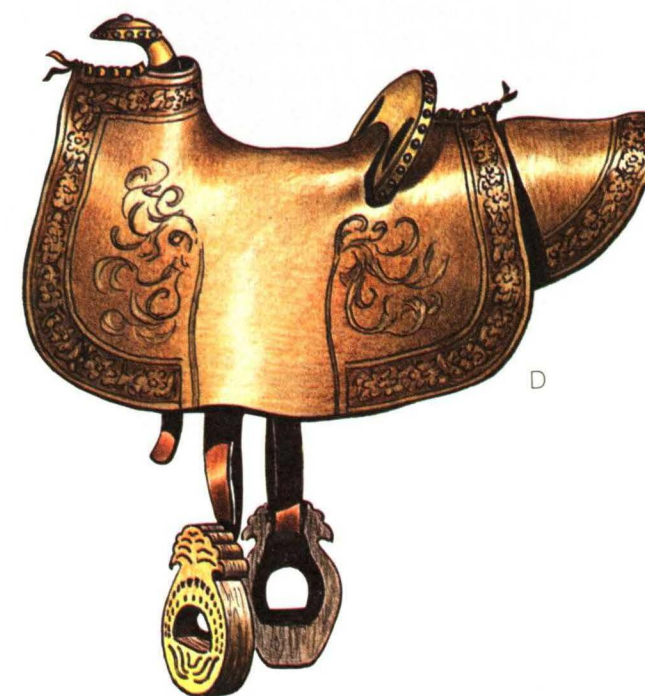


C



E

- A) Skeleton rig
- B) Saddle with anquera, for riding double
- C) Saddle with tapaderos (stirrup covers) and comiseta, detachable leather housing with horn and cantle openings.
- D) Saddle with mochila, a larger and differently styled leather covering which fits over the comiseta, showing one piece wooden stirrups.
- E) Saddle with cojinillos, similar in style to the comiseta, but with saddle pockets and strings, this forms the final cover.

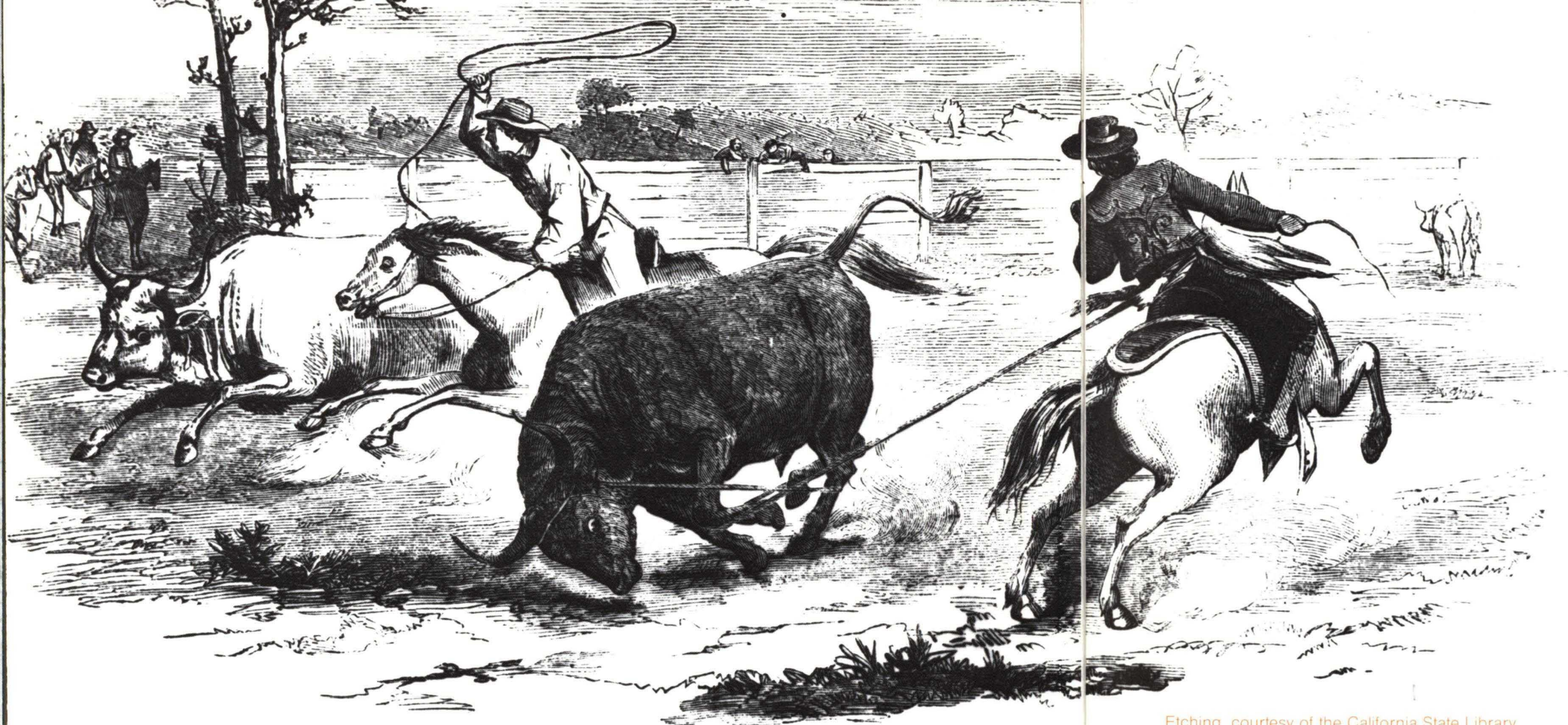


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The saddle of the Spanish colonial dandy was often covered with a *coraza*, a housing separate from the saddle tree or frame, which had a hole cut to accommodate the horn and cantle and was laced to the frame, front and back. These were usually highly decorated with designs in colored silks and gold or silver threads. Decorated coverings of varied styles were made for other occasions.

Usually suspended from the rear of the saddle horn, with a strap around the cantle or back of the saddle, were *armas*, the forerunner of the cowboy's chaps, used to protect the rider's legs and to give some protection to the horse from heavy brush. Although these were necessary in Baja California due to the heavy cactus in that region, and were used by early colonists in Alta California, they were eventually discarded by riders in northern California because they were considered unnecessary weight. They were replaced by lightweight *armitas* made of buckskin or calf skin.

The rider's *capa*, or cloak, was usually rolled and tied behind the saddle cantle when it was not being worn. The flanks of the ranchero's horse were often covered with an *anquera*, or flanker, which, although standardized in shape, was found in many designs. *Tapaderos*, or stirrup covers, were developed which the American cowboy later referred to as, simply, "taps." Here again, the Spanish influence added colored silk or metallic stitching, hand tooling and, often, tassels.



Etching, courtesy of the California State Library.

By 1775, commercially starved, colonial California, serviced by an annual or biannual supply ship, found itself becoming wealthy with cattle but destitute for goods from the outside world. The government supply ships brought essential items: tools, implements, fabrics, and silver and brass religious ornaments. Although there had been an established prohibition against any commercial business between Spanish colonials and traders from foreign nations, restrictions were generally being relaxed under Charles III, King of Spain. Although the restrictions were eased, they were by no means completely abolished. The new regulations required the cargo of each foreign vessel to be unloaded, examined by local government officials, and reloaded before the traders paid the duty and licenses were issued to trade on the California coast.

Foreign ships plying the Mexican-California coast were interested in trading for anything of commercial value. Drawn to the Pacific shores of the North American continent by the prospect of establishing trade in furs, foreign traders learned that the Californians were cattle raisers rather than fur trappers. During the 1780's, the hide and tallow business, which became so profitable to the missions and ranchos, developed in the California ports with local official sanction. Ships brought a variety of goods to trade for hides, tallow, soap, and a limited number of sea otter pelts.

By the turn of the century, Yankee merchant vessels were trading great quantities of inexpensive furniture and a limited supply of the very finest manufactured furniture on the California coast. The balance of the cargo was

usually composed of standard utility goods as well as a variety of luxury items including silks, satins, velvets, brocades, and other fabrics, delicate laces, metallic braids and every variety of jewelry and ornament. Goods came not only from cities on the east coast of the United States but also from European countries and China. The colorful Spanish shawl, for example, was originally of Chinese manufacture.

Although it would seem logical for the hides, which had an average trade value of two dollars, and tallow to be gathered in advance of the arrival of the merchant ships, the easy-going way of life observed by the Californians caused general disregard of this logic. Therefore, the arrival of trading ships proved to be a time not only for heightened excitement, but also for greatly increased activity and the vaqueros gathered for a regional *rodeo*, or round up.

The rodeo was a carefully regulated affair which involved bringing all cattle in from the open ranges and separating mission cattle from those owned by the *rancheros* according to brands and earmarkings. It was common practice for all stock owners and their *vaqueros* to be required by law to participate in regional rodeos.

After the animals were separated and checked, the number selected to be slaughtered for their hides and tallow would be driven to a pre-designated area, the *matanzas*. The remaining cattle were driven to their respective home ranges.

There were two methods used in the *matanzas* by the *vaqueros* to begin the process of taking hides and tallow. One method involved the use of their skill in roping. A team of *vaqueros* would ride to cut an animal from the massed herd, drive it toward the slaughtering area, and once there, rope the animal and jerk it to the ground where the butchers would kill the animal and *peladores*, skimmers, and *tasajeros*, meat cutters, would finish the job.

The second method, used when time was short, called upon the best of the *vaqueros'* skills in riding and the use of the long knife. A group of *vaqueros* on horseback would position themselves around the herd to hold them together as much as possible. Another group of mounted *vaqueros* would ride into the herd and, with expert knife work, kill cattle as they rode among them. Pandemonium broke as the remaining cattle sensed danger and tried to flee from the group. Suddenly the scene became one of running cattle, riding *vaqueros*, intricate knife work and falling cattle. After the cattle were killed and the skimmers and cutters finished with their work, the task of gathering the tallow and fat was usually turned over to the Indian women. The *vaquero* played no part in preparing the hides or tallow for delivery to the merchant ships.

After their hard work and activity, the *vaqueros* were ready to celebrate. The rodeo-matanzas provided a perfect reason for festivities. Music, dancing, and merry making, as well as much practical joking, usually followed the work.



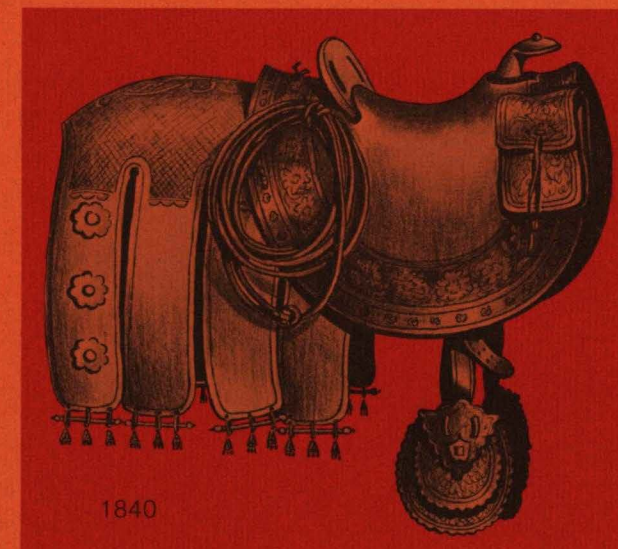
"Man Lassoing Bear,"
reproduction of oil painting by James Walker,
from the Gilcrease collection.

It is, perhaps, difficult to imagine the importance of the horse in the day of the vaquero. Much of their recreation, as well as work, involved the horse. Both men and women thought little of making a full day's ride to attend a special event or celebration. The most favored events involved games of skill involving the horse and its rider.

Various competitions devised by the vaqueros tested their agility as well as their riding skills. Some tests involved various animals; however, the most appealing were the most dangerous. *Corrida del toro* involved releasing a fierce bull in an enclosed corral where several vaqueros on horseback would prove their riding skill and bravery by riding toward the bull waving serapes or capes to entice the bull to charge. This was often followed by *colear del toro*, a more dangerous trial, which involved the mounted vaqueros' trying to catch the enraged bull by the tail. The vaquero who succeeded in catching the bull's tail, tried, by careful maneuvering of his horse and by twisting the tail, to flip the bull to the ground.

The ultimate test of all the vaquero's skills was made when a group of vaqueros would go out to rope and to bring in a grizzly bear. Although virtually extinct today, the Sonora grizzly was a continuing threat to the stock of the ranches of California during its colonization. Mission records from that period indicate that large numbers of cattle were killed by grizzlies. A single blow from the bear's powerful front paws could break the neck of a full grown steer. The reported danger of the animal only served to increase the challenge which he presented to the skills of the vaqueros. Proud of their abilities, the vaqueros sought the opportunity to oppose so formidable a foe.

After locating Mr. Oso, the vaqueros, usually in a group of four or more, found the first test to be of their ability to control their horses which became almost unmanageable at the smell or sight of a bear. It was no simple chore to get those well trained, usually responsive horses to move in close enough for the vaqueros to put their roping skills into play.



As soon as two vaqueros could get into position and rope the bear around the neck, they pulled in opposite directions to keep him from tearing up horses, riders, and a league or two of land. At this point, a third man would loop his reata over one of the bear's hind legs. Assuming that all had gone according to plan up to this point, the next problem involved getting the raging bear back to the home corral. The fourth vaquero would ride close in front of the bear in the direction of home. The idea behind this maneuver was to cause the bear to make repeated charges on the horse and rider, thus, speeding the trip home. The reason for taking the grizzly back to the ranch was to have a match between the bear and a bull. In accounts known of fights between bear and bull, the bull was always the loser.

The days of the hard riding, fun loving vaquero and of the great California ranches were not destined to go on forever. As the ranchmen in the cow country of the American West were to learn over a century later, the cattle business was usually feast or famine. Beginning around 1810, a series of droughts plagued California. With large herds on the ranches and thousands of *mestenos*, mustangs, running wild, the overstocked ranges could not support the ever increasing number of animals.

With the grass being burned out and wells and springs drying up, the years of drought be-

gan to take their toll. Thousands of cattle died; surplus stock had to go. Cattle hides still had some worth and horses sold at twenty-five cents each.

The mustangs, however, were not only useless to the ranchers, but also were eating a large part of the sparse pasturage. Hundreds of these wild horses were driven over cliffs to die in the ocean below. Many were herded into corrals, divided from the branded horses, and methodically killed with lances. Desperate measures were employed in this desperate situation. However, despite all efforts the great mission ranches and ranchos of California were not able to withstand the effects of the droughts which continued into the 1840's.

The mission ranches not only faced the hardships of the droughts but also were ordered to secularize the holdings of the missions when

the Spanish rule was overthrown. This order ended the Franciscan mission movement in California and mission lands were opened to settlers.

In the late 1840's, gold was discovered in California and the region became a territory of the United States at about the same time. The search for gold and land brought an influx of settlers and soon brought about the depletion of the remnants of the once great California herds.

The golden era of the California vaquero was ended. The land was divided and acres which were once great open grazing lands felt the cut of the plow. Although the California ranchos and vaqueros did not endure, they exerted a lasting influence on the cattle industry and helped to set the stage for the American cowboy.



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Pen and Ink drawing by José Cisneros, from a series of historic horsemen.

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