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The South Texas Rancho

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The South Texas Rancho by Dr. Manuel Medrano

The vociferous crow of a crimson rooster signals the impending dawn. A ring-tailed hawk perches on the bent branch of a mesquite tree where a chicharra has just completed her nightly serenade. Water gurgles from a pond next to a weathered windmill. The smell of bacon, eggs, chile del monte and pan de campo flows through an open window of the casa grande. A Spanish bridle clangs in the hands of an old vaquero who has been a man since he was fourteen. He begins another day just as vaqueros have done for over two and a half centuries, at sunrise on a South Texas rancho.

Although the vaquero story in Texas began in the mid-eighteenth century the vaquero's origins are in the Iberian Peninsula. The Spaniards established the vaquero tradition long before 1492 when Columbus arrived in the New World. They would bring this tradition to the New World where some customs would be modified and eventually lead to the development of the vaquero culture in the South Texas ranchos.

The birth of vaquero culture can be traced back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the Iberian Peninsula specifically, Spain's Meseta Central, a plateau found in the heart of Spain. During the late Middle Ages, cattle had roamed throughout Europe, but it was in Spain where cattle ranching became a major economic institution on the Andalusia Plains, coastal plains found on the southern portion of Spain.¹ Spanish workmen mounted horses, herded cattle and adopted Moorish styles of riding and fighting on horseback. Dogs were frequently used in order to herd the cattle effectively. The necessity for adaptation led to the development of techniques brought to the new world and still used in many places today. "Long distance grazing, periodic roundups, branding, and overland cattle drives" were a few of these techniques.²

The ranch workers had different responsibilities. The crew in charge of tending the cattle included a mayoral, a rabadan, about a dozen vaqueros, and a conocedor. The mayoral supervised the workers. The vaqueros maintained and herded the cattle. The conocedor knew the cattle well enough to recognize them in case they were ever lost or stolen.

The two types of vaqueros on Spanish ranches were the freeman and the bonded servant. The freemen were usually treated better, paid in wages or livestock and sometimes allowed to herd their own cattle with those of their boss. The bonded servants were not as well treated or regularly paid.

Thus, these ranching traditions were brought and disseminated in the New World by the Spaniards. Columbus brought Andalusian cattle and horses to the Caribbean during his second expedition. Later explorers would do the same.

In 1519 when Cortes landed in Mexico, he also brought Andalusian horses which were an asset during the conquest. It is believed Cortes introduced the first registered cattle brand,

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the Spanish triple cross, in the New World as he was one of the few landowners. These privileged Spaniards thought it was beneath their status to work with the cattle thus, to provide labor in the ranches, the *encomienda* was established. Landowners received labor from the natives in the region and, in return, were responsible for protecting, caring for and converting them to Catholicism. The *encomienda* system flourished throughout New Spain. The first vaquero was merely a native "laborer riding a horse."³ Mestizos, Africans and mulattos later joined the natives as the typical vaqueros in Mexico. Originally, they owned their horses and equipment, but that changed. Soon, non-Spaniards were barred from owning horses or selling livestock. The Spanish tradition of paying the vaqueros with livestock and allowing them to work on the land was discontinued. Now these laborers were paid in money and slept outdoors.

Much of the vaquero clothing was a mixture of native and Spanish tradition. Vaqueros wore sombreros and bandanas for protection from the sun and wore cotton shirts during hot weather and wool shirts during cold weather. Chaquetas, leather jackets and breeches were added later. They wore botas or leather leggings from the ankles to the knees for protection while riding. Although some Mexican vaqueros worked barefooted, many wore leather shoes or jackboots usually given to them by the landowner.

The Mexican vaqueros used three types of saddles. The first was the *silla de montar* or the Spanish War Saddle. This saddle was heavy and had long stirrups which made it difficult for the rider to mount and dismount. The second saddle adopted from the Moors, was called the *jineta*. It had shorter stirrups which alleviated the mounting and dismounting difficulties of the *silla de montar*. The last saddle was the western stock saddle developed in the West Indies in order to meet the working needs of the vaqueros. As time went by, different saddles emerged in order to meet the individual needs of the vaqueros.

Vaqueros in Mexico used a variety of tools in order to accomplish their many tasks. A tool that is synonymous with the vaquero is the lasso or la *reata* (lariat) used to rope the cattle. The lasso was actually introduced as a substitute for the hocking knife. Originally, the hocking knife was used to disable cattle to be slaughtered. This knife would rip the animal's hamstring injuring it to the point that it could not rise again. The hocking knife was used when the cattle was valued more for its hide and tallow than its meat. As the meat became more valuable, the lasso became a more important tool and gradually replaced the hocking knife. At first the lasso was attached to a lance and looped over the horns of the cattle. Eventually the lasso skills of the vaqueros improved so that vaqueros would twirl the lasso over their head and rope cattle.

In 1836 Texas gained its independence from the Mexican government. Thus, the Mexican vaquero became the Tejano cowboy. Américo Paredes described the rancho where

many vaqueros lived as communal. "Roundups and branding were community projects, undertaken according to the advice of the old men (patriarchs)."⁴ Although he continued to employ his traditional skills such as roping, branding, marking, and roundup, his job responsibilities expanded with the cattle drives of the mid and later eighteenth century. After the Civil War many Texas ranchers succeeded in marketing their cattle at packing plants in St. Louis, Kansas City and Chicago. A steer worth five dollars in Texas was worth four to eight times as much in Chicago. The challenge of course was to get it there. Shortly after the Civil War large cattle herds were driven up via cattle trails to rail heads in Kansas and Missouri. During the next twenty-five years more than five million cattle from the South Texas border were herded to towns such as Dodge City and Abilene up the Western and Chisholm Trails.⁵

The horse was the cowboy's most prized possession. An old cowboy described horses in the following manner, "Some horses are more intelligent than others; some are more educated, formally or informally; some horses are fine natured and some are mean, but these latter are never so ugly and petty as mean people ... Kid cautions me to always remember that a horse can stand only a little more than his rider and that a good horseman feeds and cares for his horse before seeing to his own needs. There is a difference between a wild horse and an outlaw horse: a wild horse will buck one off and run; an outlaw horse will buck one off and then turn to kill one."⁶

Whether on the ranch or on the long drive the vaqueros remained essential to the border communities. General George W. Hughes who served with General John Wool during the U.S. –Mexico War described the cowboy as a rather light-colored Indian dressed in a pair of leather unmentionables, without suspenders, buttoning from the knee downwards, which are usually left open in warm weather for comfort, and to exhibit the white drawers underneath; a common cotton shirt; a red sash tied tightly around the waist; a pair of sandals on his feet, and enormous iron spurs on heel; with a heavy conical felt hat (that could almost resist a sabre cut) on the head, and a long iron-pointed aspen goad in hand, and you have a perfect picture of the ranchero, or rather vaquero. Mounted on a spirited pony, with a lasso at his saddle-bow, he is no mean adversary for a single man to encounter. He rides well and fearlessly and throws the lasso with unerring aim. It is a beautiful sight to see him with his old blanket (worn as a poncho in cold weather) streaming in the wind, his head bent eagerly forward, and lasso whirling in circles high in the air, chasing down some refractory animal that he seldom fails to catch, at the first throw, by the neck or hind foot, bringing him violently to the ground. . .⁷

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo stipulated that the Rio Grande, not the Nueces River was the southern boundary of Texas. Consequently, many more Anglos migrated to South

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Texas and acquired much land by both legal and unscrupulous means. Joseph Graham described this as a transition period from “Rancho to the Ranch.”⁸

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries brought about major changes in South Texas including the virtual end of the open range. Ranchland became farmland and El Valle became the Magic Valley partly because of the extension of the railroad to South Texas. San Benito, Harlingen, Weslaco, and Donna were a few of the new towns that emerged. Deep water wells, windmills and new cattle breeds such as the Santa Gertrudis were examples of the new technology introduced to Valley ranches.⁹

As a result of these and other innovations, the cowboys’ responsibilities became more diversified. For example, the windmill and the barbed wire eliminated the need for long drives to northern markets. Additionally, cowboys learned to use dipping vats to kill disease carrying ticks.¹⁰ His methods for working cattle, however, did not change significantly. Roundups continued but now in individual pastures and the cowboys’ traditional skills of roping, tying and branding remained essential to their success.

In the twentieth century, as in earlier times, there were more Mexican vaqueros than Anglo cowboys on Valley ranches. Vaqueros were often preferred by ranchers because they were usually married and worked longer at a ranch than Anglo bachelors who were more transient.¹¹ As cattle ranches changed, both cowboys and vaqueros added repairing windmills, barbed wire fences and watering troughs to their job description. During droughts when it rained less than ten inches per year, cowboys learned to torch the nopal or prickly pear cactus thorns and use the cactus as food for the cattle.

José Luis Longoria, the caporal or foreman of the McAllen Ranch, reminisced about his life as a cowboy. He grew up on his father’s ranch in Starr County. His grandfather and father were both vaqueros. Even as a boy, he loved the ranch life. As soon as he was old enough to get a horse, he became a cowboy. A few years after high school he began to work on the McAllen Ranch and he has remained there for thirty four years.¹²

Longoria comments about a typical day for the modern vaquero: “From 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. we do a lot of different things like put cattle in pens, sort them out, and brand them. We still go out on horseback to gather cattle. We rope and vaccinate them. . . We raise Beef Master Cattle. We train horses, breed mares and sell cattle and horses.”¹³

From his experiences, Longoria believes that the future of the vaquero will depend on economics and the desire to keep his tradition alive. He states, “In some counties like Hidalgo County, the number of ranches has diminished by nearly fifty percent over the last half century.

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Ranches have to diversity; oil and gas, game management and deer and exotic animals are becoming the new sources of income.”¹⁴

Change continues to be the constant for the Valley vaquero. Long drives and six shooters have given way to helicopters, pickups, and cell phones. Technology has modernized the cowboy yet decreased his numbers. Despite time and innovation, his work ethic and respect for traditions remain firmly in the past marked by history, diversity and a constant evolution. In many ways, Longoria epitomizes this change and a firm devotion to tradition by his own words, “I’ve always said that it doesn’t matter how much you make if you enjoy what you do. This is what I love to do. I’m proof of it. I’m still doing it. I’m not a rich man, but I never lacked anything. There are still those people who live this kind of life and are happy with it.”¹⁵ In a world of global warming, economic recession, and a border wall, José Luis Longoria remains a happy man and continues the tradition of the valley vaquero.

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