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VAQUEROS DEL VALLE: BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

by Manuel Medrano

For many years, the vaquero has been researched, remembered and romanticized. In New Spain, he was essential to the success of haciendas and ranchos. In the United States the long drives of the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s forever memorialized the vaquero as a horse man of the Plains. His skills were impeccable; his work ethic was incomparable; his Spanish/ Mexican origins were undeniable. Nowhere were these roots more evident than in the Rio Grande Valley. Valley vaqueros are a product of the past and the present, and in a rapidly changing environment, they continue their evolution.

Walter Prescott Webb once called the area south of San Antonio, “the Nueces Diamond,” the center of cowboy culture.¹ Américo Paredes later described the rancho, where many vaqueros lived, as a communal institution where “roundups and branding were community projects undertaken according to the advice of old men (patriarchs).”²

Although the vaquero story in Texas began in the mid-eighteenth century, the vaquero’s origins are in the Iberian Peninsula in Spain’s Mesta Central in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the Middle Ages, ranching became a major economic institution on the Andalusia coastal Plains.³

On these ranchos, Spanish workmen adopted Moorish styles of riding and herding cattle, often using dogs. The necessity for adaptation also led to the development of techniques such as extended area grazing and biannual *corridas* (roundups) brought to the New World and still used in many places today. The crew in charge of the corrida included the *mayordomo* (foreman), a *caporal* (team leader), and a few vaqueros. The mayordomo supervised the roundup; the vaqueros maintained the herd and the caporal supervised them.⁴

Spaniards of privilege thought it was beneath their status to work with the cattle. Thus, to provide labor on the ranches, the *encomienda* was established. Landowners received labor from the native people in the region and they, 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.”⁵ Mestizos, Africans and mulattos later joined him as the typical vaqueros in Mexico.

Much of the vaquero clothing was a mixture of native and Spanish tradition. Vaqueros used *sombreros* and *bandanas* for protection from the sun. They wore cotton shirts during hot weather and wool shirts during cold weather. *Chaquetas* (leather jackets), *sotas* (breeches) and *botas* (leather leggings) were also part of their attire. Although some Mexican vaqueros worked barefooted, many wore leather shoes or jackboots usually given to them by the landowner.⁶

The Mexican vaqueros used three types of saddles. The first was the *silla de montar* or 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

reduced mounting and dismounting difficulties. The last saddle was the western stock saddle developed in the West Indies to meet the working needs of the vaqueros.⁷ As time went by, different saddles emerged to meet the individual needs of the vaqueros.

Vaquero tasks including *manzando* (breaking wild mustangs), *cortando* (cutting one animal from the rest of the herd), and *lazando* (roping), required intricate timing and extensive ability. Andres Tijerina writes, "lazar was one of the most spectacular and aesthetic of the vaquero skills, reaching its finest level of artistic skill in northern Mexico and South Texas in the nineteenth century."⁸

In 1836 Texas gained its independence from the Mexican government, making the Mexican vaquero the Tejano vaquero. Although he continued to employ his traditional skills such as roping, branding, marking, and working roundups, 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 on cattle trails to rail heads in Kansas and Missouri. During the next twenty-five years, millions of cattle from the South Texas border were herded to towns such as Dodge City and Abilene up the Western and Chisholm Trails.⁹

The horse was the cowboy's most prized possession. An old cowboy described horses in the following manner:

*"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."*¹⁰

Whether on the ranch or on the long drive, 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 and his skills with these words:

*"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."*¹¹

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 Texas and acquired much land by both legal and unscrupulous means. Joseph Graham described this as a transition period from "Rancho to the Ranch."¹²

As invaluable as vaqueros were to the ranchers, their wages and working conditions did not transition

significantly. Pay usually depended on work description and hierarchy. Typical monthly wages ranged from eight to twelve dollars, including for the *kinenos* or King Ranch cowboys. In most instances, herding and roundups were required from all cowboys.¹³

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, dipping vats and barbed wire fences were examples new technology introduced to Valley ranchos.¹⁴ Vaqueros built and maintained these innovations. During droughts, they even used torches to burn thorns off the nopales to feed the cattle. Their 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.¹⁵

José Luis Longoria, the caporal or foreman of the McAllen Ranch, reminisces about his life as a vaquero. 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. Soon after his high school graduation, he began working on the McAllen Ranch and remained there for thirty-four years. Longoria commented about a typical day for a 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 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.*¹⁶

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. Ranches have to diversify; oil and gas, game management and deer and exotic animals are becoming the new sources of income."*¹⁷

Change continues to be the norm for the Valley vaquero. Long drives and six shooters have given way to helicopters, pickups, and cell phones. Technology has modernized the vaquero, but decreased his numbers. Despite time and innovation, his work ethic and respect for tradition remain firmly in the past marked by an unwavering loyalty. Yet, he is keenly cognizant of the irrepressible continuum of history. Philosophically, Longoria says,

*"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."*¹⁸

The Rio Grande Valley remains a place of duality, some old and some new. Old vaqueros still tell their

cuentos about their youth and times gone by. A Saturday evening *quinceañera* with a *conjunto* is being celebrated in the shadows of a new wind farm, while people are texting or tweeting during the dance. Outside El Valle exists a world of global warming, increasing terrorism and immigration controversy. José Luis Longoria, however, remains a happy man as he continues the rich tradition of the Valley vaquero.

NOTES

1. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1931), 209.
2. Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1958), 13.
3. Joseph S. Graham, *El Rancho in South Texas* (Denton, Texas: Uni. of North Texas Press, 1994), 9.
4. Andres Tijerina, *Tejano Empire, Life on the South Texas Rancho* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1998), 60.
5. Joe S. Graham, *El Rancho in South Texas* (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1994), 13.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Tijerina, 61.
9. Graham, 40-41.
10. Joseph Faulds, *Conventions with Kid Cougar and Lim Hang High* (Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1976), 24.
11. George W. Hughes, 1849-1850, *Memoir Descriptive of a Division of the United States Army*. Senate Ex. Doc. No. 32, 31st Congress, 1st Session from Graham's *El Rancho in South Texas*, 29.
12. Joe S. Graham, 37.
13. Armando Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 199.
14. Graham, 50-51.
15. Juan Luis Longoria interview, September 2, 2011.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*

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