

CALIFORNIA BANKNOTES, THE FANTASY HERITAGE, AND GREASER LAWS

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The origins of the cowboy or *vaquero* (from *vaca*) can be traced back to the Spanish and Mexican settlers of Texas and California. Both the longhorn and the mustang (*mesteño*) were introduced into the New World by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage. The cow fed the *conquistador* and the *caballo* helped subdue the Native Americans, although once they mastered the art of riding they also became formidable horsemen.

A roundup of wild stock was known as a *rodeo* and records show that in 1806 eight thousand horses were rounded up in the valleys around San Jose. Thousands of horses were “driven in the sea” at Santa Barbara in 1807, and the same thing was done in Monterey in 1810. According to Guadalupe Vallejo, a Spanish Grandee from Sonoma, “there were so many horses that young men would ride from one rancho to another for parties, and whoever found his horse tired would let him go and catch another.” “Only old people and invalids used the slow cart, or *carreta*.”¹

California became independent from Spain in 1821, and shortly thereafter its ports witnessed the arrival of trading ships from Britain and Boston. Hides and tallow were traded for manufactured goods, and the import duties helped the Mexican government run the far-flung province of Alta California. Cowhides, known as “California banknotes,” became the prevalent form of wealth among the *Californianos*.

In his memoirs, Guadalupe Vallejo used the term “Spanish Californians” to describe his family and painted an idyllic picture of the relationships between the aristocracy and their Indian and *mestizo* servants. “It seems to me that there never was a more peaceful or happy people on the face of the earth than the Spanish, Mexican, and Indian population of Alta California before the American conquest,” he wrote.²

In describing an outing to some warm springs, Vallejo recalled how the entire household “waked before sun rise to prepare for the wash-day expedition” to the *agua caliente* and how “We climbed in, under the green cloth of an old Mexican flag which was used as an awning, and the white-haired Indian *ganan*, who had driven the *carreta* since his boyhood, plodded beside with his long *garrocha* or ox-goad.”³

The myth of the halcyon days of Spanish California survives today in the Old Spanish Day’s Fiesta here in Santa Barbara. Carey McWilliams calls this the “fantasy heritage” in that many of the original settlers were *mestizos* and *mulatos* who came from the interior of Mexico looking to escape discrimination and find a better standard of living.⁴ An

¹ Guadalupe Vallejo, “Ranch and Mission Day in Alta California,” *Century Magazine* Vol. XLI (December 1890) pp. 183-92, 189.

² Vallejo, 183.

³ Guadalupe, 192.

⁴ Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*. (New York: Greenwood P, 1968), 186.

example of this was the Pico family, listed as *mulattos* in a 1790 census, but who, over time, became white or *gente de razón*.

Beginning with Jedidiah Smith in 1826, Yankee trapper traders filtered into Alta California to become Mexican citizens and marry local girls, receive land grants, and merge into the California upper classes. Jacob Leese of Sonoma, Oliver Larkin of Monterey, William Dana of Santa Barbara, Abel Sterns of Los Angeles, and John Warner of San Diego fit this pattern. According to historian David J. Weber, these men who settled California in the 1820s and 1830s “lived comfortably in Mexican society and did not first favor annexing California to the United States.”⁵

Nonetheless, Yankee tourists learned from the *vaquero*. Difficulty in pronouncing the word BAH-CARE-OH changed the spelling to “buckaroo.” In the process of learning the ropes from his Mexican counterpart, the Anglo changed *riat* to “lariat” and *lazo* to “lasso.” *Chaparreras*, leather leggings used to protect the legs from the *chaparral*, became “chaps.” Likewise the Western saddle was adapted from the Mexican *vaquero*’s working saddle, as were the spurs, or *espuelas*.

Words such as *adobe*, *corral*, *patio*, *arroyo*, and *grande* began creeping into the cowboy’s “lingo” from *lengua* or tongue. This is an early form of Tex-Mex or “Spanglish” when a “gringo” (perhaps from “green go,”) would say “vamoose” (*vamos*; let’s go) “lasso” that “desperado” (*desesperado*; desperate one), take him to the “hoosegow” (*juzgado*; court) and put him in the “calaboose” (*calabozo*; jail).

The linguistically confused bumpkin would grow to like *chile con carne* and *jalapenos* and cook his “barbeque” (*barbacoa*; from the Caribe Indians) out on the range. The new settlers even adopted the style of dress like the ten-gallon hat, a direct copy of the *charro*’s (expert horseman) *tan galán* (very decorative) *sombrero*, which has nothing to do with liquid capacity.

It was not the *tejano* or *californiano* who adopted the leather moccasins and coonskin hats (both derived from the Native American). The Anglo settlers came to the Southwest and used adobe materials to build their homes, Mexican techniques of ranching and irrigation, as well as the cuisine and culture of the native peoples.

So it’s really ironic that by 1855 the California legislature passed laws prohibiting such Sunday amusements as bull, bear, and cock fights, clearly aimed at customs of the *Californianos*. The same legislature which refused to provide for the translation of laws into Spanish as required by the state constitution also passed an anti-vagrancy act aimed at the Spanish-speaking that was popularly known as the “Greaser Law.”

⁵ David Weber, *Foreigners in their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans*. (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2003), 56.