

# COWBOYS - VAQUEROS

## Origins Of The first American Cowboys

### Chapter 4

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#### Romancing The Old West

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In this country there is no better place to find the preservation of the old Spanish ways than New Mexico, as this state is well known for having been isolated hundreds of years by vast rugged distances and warring Indians. So well preserved are the origins of the American West that even the 15th century "foundation" livestock scarcely available in other parts of the world thrive in New Mexico. You can still find descendants of the rugged, enduring, power house-in-a-small-package Spanish Barb horses, Churra sheep, and Corriente cattle. You can hear cowboy history in the old, spoken Spanish. Although these old vaqueros are increasingly hard to find, there remain a few smaller than average, more rugged than average Onate colony decedents who will speak to you in the 15th century Spanish of the conquistadores preserved through fifteen generations of oral tradition.

Happily to this day, the romance of wide open western spaces lives on in New Mexico. The Spanish caballero, already sporting a legacy of proud horsemanship even before Columbus' arrival in North America, saw the first rodeos whenever young vaqueros had some free time, an opportunity to turn work into play, and to show off their skills.

The first American Rodeos which took place in the early 1600's were conducted by the first American cowboys, the Spanish vaqueros. Two hundred twenty three years before the first easterners arrived in Texas to learn the art of the cowboy - vaquero was already a folk hero in New Mexico. He had come to be known as a horseman of great skill and bravery. He was a solid comrade with his fellow vaqueros and a die-hard loyalist to his ranch and its brand. He was looked up to by wranglers as a man who could rope anything that moved and rides anything that bucked. He could successfully do just about anything from a saddle. During the time of these first



rodeos standardized rules and point systems were developed to determine who would win the vaquero competitions. "Jueces de campo," (hold overs from Spain), or rodeo judges presided over the rodeos to settle ownership disputes and assure that stock were branded correctly. Generally the vaqueros tended the stock on the open range until it was time to sell, brand, or butcher the animals. Anyone of these events required a rounding up of the animals - "al rodear." This was called a rodeo.

The killing (butchering) of an animal which frequently accompanied a rodeo was called a "Matanza," see section on la Matanza, below. The first recorded references to a Rodeo in the official republic of the United States are made in old New Mexico family journals when Jose Antonio Chavez, (born 1820) married Maria Apolinia Silva, (born February 12, 1827), in 1849. Following their wedding in Valencia County, New Mexico, the journals indicate that after the novios, (bride and groom) departed the wedding dance the celebration was continued by the jubilant ranch hands that rounded up some of the ranch wild livestock and conducted a Rodeo in the ranch corral between the competing new family in-law factions. Rodeo entertainment spreading around the country was modeled after the Spanish-Mexican rodeos. One of the first northern rodeos was recorded in which admission was charged was in Prescott, Arizona in 1888. Eventually these rodeo competitions have formalized into traditional events called "charreadas" where the vaqueros developed expert tricks and styles and performed before an audience.

In Mexico and sometimes in southwestern U.S. states, charreadas are still held in connection with rodeos wherever Charro associations are involved in planning. Historically, in its isolation, New Mexico did not experience the influences of change that rapidly came to pass in surrounding geographic areas like Arizona, Colorado, Texas, distant California, and even old Mexico.

Prior to the establishment of the Santa Fe trail eastward in the early 19th century, "...there was virtually no communication with either the Texans or the Californians; the only trails ran south, back into Mexico along those trails, supply trains of ox-drawn two-wheeled carretas took 2 months to carry merchandise - sugar, coffee, hardware and textiles - up from Chihuahua. Other trains, bringing military equipment and ammunition from Mexico City, needed 5 months to complete the 1,800-mile journey, and they arrived 3 years apart." In fact, there are genealogical charts on public display at the Belen, New Mexico Harvey House museum documenting the many descendant families of Juan de Onates' original colonial settlements. They are yet living along the Rio Abajo, some of them still ranching and "cowboying" like their original vaquero grandparents.



# LA MATANZA

## *An Hispanic Tradition*

La Matanza, (“the killing,” of any butcher animal, but, traditionally of a hog), in this part of the country, (New Mexico) has been a traditional, annual event since the coming of such early Spanish and Portuguese explorers as Juan de Onate and Coronado over four hundred years ago.

Its purpose was originally a harvest of meat in the fall or winter after the pigs or hogs had sufficient time to grow to between three and six hundred pounds. Over time, it, (La Matanza), became an integral part of the Hispanic culture in every village; a social ritual that transcended its original purpose of feeding us to the equally important job of preserving and maintaining the lifelong bonds of immediate and extended family. Moreover, because it was such a big job and frequently yielded in excess of one to two hundred pounds of Manteca, (lard), Matanzas became the social adhesive which helped to unite and bond together whole communities.

The Pre-Columbian history and significance of “La Matanza” goes back even further, tracing the tradition to the Iberian Peninsula in Spain, thousands of years since humans first began domesticating animals for food. The Celts arrived in what is now Spain, in 1300 B.C. The early name of Spain, “Iberia”, is Celtic and is derived from their word “aber”, or “open” as it translates in Spanish, meaning “harbor” or “river”. The name is also very common in the Peninsula as a “Castilian” name. Celts prized their livestock, and pigs were important enough livestock for the Celts to carve granite statues in the image of pigs to be used as tombstones and territorial markers. During the time when Spain was under Moorish rule, between 711A.D. and 1492, the word for pig more with greater frequency came to be known as “*Marrano*,” the etymology of which evolved from an Arabic root meaning “prohibited thing,” or “outsider.” Pork is commonly known to be outside or prohibited from the diet of Arab, (Moor’s), culture and religion. Being that Spaniards prized pork it was a natural for taking on symbolic significance as an icon of Christian Spanish political and religious resistance against their oppressors. Enter La Matanza and the pig became the perfect line of delineation separating the Christian Spaniards from their conquerors. So La Matanza took on new meaning becoming not just a tradition and occasion of family feast, but, moreover, a tradition for Catholic Spain persevering almost eight centuries, finally defeating the Moors in January 1492 and then, with religious momentum later, issuing an edict to expel the Jews.

Like many other cultural traditions knowing how and where you fit into the chronology of history plays a major role in how we develop our self-concept and sense of self worth. So it is in the Hispanic community in New Mexico and Valencia County in particular. Over the years and decades, Matanzas helped us children



conceptualize who we were. As we acquired greater responsibility, from year to year so did we become increasingly comfortable and proud of whom we ultimately saw every morning in the bathroom mirror. Unlike times in our country during beginning and middle part of the last century when there really were people who did not have enough to eat, today when half of all children in the country will be separated from one of their parents by the age of eighteen, when youth gangs, rather than elder patrons rule the streets we can reflect in retrospect, and see now that more than a family feeding event, matanzas were part of a greater cultural process of self conceptualization, of becoming a healthy well adjusted adult.

Each Matanza was an event sometimes two years in the making, as two years is about the period needed for hogs to reach optimal weight. Family members were trained and delegated responsibilities based on their age and station in the family unit, beginning with daily feeding all the way up to the expert bleeding and butcher skills needed the day of the killing, (matanza). Generally, the older men consisted of the killing crew and butchering large cuts of meat. The women prepared the many other aspects of cooking like they did day in and day out, cutting carnitas, chicharones, chopping potatoes and onions, cooking beans, chile, Posole, tortillas, etc.

Final preparations were made in November or December the day before La Matanza when water was hauled in buckets from a hand drilled well or nearby acequia, (irrigation ditch), to fill fifty gallon drums. The drums were placed over a pit where a large enough fire could be ignited to bring the barrels of water to a boil. When I was a child, people arrived at Matanzas in waves. Depending on your specific role or responsibility determined when you arrived. When I was an adolescent I was old enough to take responsibility for keeping the water barrels full and boiling and ensuring a flow of hot water buckets to the men scraping off the hair. There is something about feeding a fire that seems to fascinate most youngsters and for me it was a legitimate and well-supervised reason for us youngsters to play with the object of our fascination. I was not however, seasoned enough to do the bleeding or butchering. I would have to get my practice beginning with cutting strips of lonja. Nonetheless, I was quite content with my place in what I knew to be the natural order of things; our own food chain. I knew who I was in the greater scheme of my community and that grounded and centered me.

As a society, we are just recently beginning to understand how knowing who we were in the social big picture was more important than the original purpose of feeding ourselves.

A little before daybreak the fire was started and whiles the water was heated to a boil, the hog was brought to the butcher site only a few feet away from the fire. Our family used a slatted wood table not too far from the fire, the table elevated above a hole in the ground or pit excavated such that unwanted parts and blood could easily drain and collect without getting under foot. The second wave or the killing crew arrived at



dawn and killed the hog. In earlier days the patriarch or grandfather would strike the hog with a heavy hammer or heel of an axe between the eyes. Then, while the hog was unconscious, and knowing just where to cut, grandpa either severed a jugular artery or the heart always careful to catch the draining blood in a pan the make blood pudding or morcilla. I remember always being afraid for the hog as only us humans can dread death. It was a sad yet righteous moment when I believe we all silently paid homage to the hog for her sacrifice. It was a time of death that for us children put life in a perspective that just doesn't come from buying sliced ham at the supermarket or a burger at McDonalds. This is one aspect I think I wish to change in future Matanzas. That is to make that private little homage prayer an out loud prayer so that there is no question about the meaning of the hog's sacrifice, and the meaning of the whole Matanza ritual in our long Hispanic roots.

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### **Mesteneros - Mustangs**

Sheep and cattle ranching were not the only areas of vaquero endeavor. A less known aspect of "cowboying" was mustanging. Mesteneros or mustangers were the first people to make a living by catching wild horses (mestenos, or mustangs), on the American Great Plains reaching from New Mexico to the Dakotas. Many different styles and techniques were developed by various families. These men with their whole families were self-sufficient making their own lariats of rawhide, girths, bridle reins and hackamores from horse's tails and manes. According to Ruben Salas, *The West - A Hispanic Creation*, the most famous mesteneros were the Celedon brothers and Pedro Trujillo from New Mexico. "The Trujillos,' technique was to locate a herd coming to water without themselves being seen. After the mustangs drank their fill, bareback riders with ropes tied to the necks of their horses would try to run the herd toward other riders, thus closing in from both sides... The women worked at making milch burros adopt the colts or they fed them cow milk."

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### **Los Pastores**

Sheep vaqueros under the Spanish system divided the rank and labor of sheepmen as follows. The "pastor" (shepherd), was assigned a flock of sheep. Above a few pastores was assigned the vaquero, a mounted sheepman. The vaqueros reported to the "caporal," the inspector was responsible to the "patron" or owner. The system of sheep management was later adopted by the Anglo-Americans and continues in use into modern day large sheep ranches.

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### **Los Ciboleros**



On America's grassy plains ranging from New Mexico to the Dakotas, long before the muzzle loading long gun and rifle, and before the legend of the Afro-American Buffalo Riders began, the Ciboleros had developed a cowboy life-style revolving around the American Bison, also known as Buffalo. The Spanish word for Bison is "bisonte" or "cibola." Hence, the cowboys who worked Bison were called Ciboleros. Ciboleros hunted Bison in parties of from a dozen to two dozen men who rode Spanish ponies trained to run in tandem next to the fleeing Bison while the Cibolero killed the Bison with his lance. Once the Bison was mortally wounded the Cibolero would race to the next Bison and kill another one. This process was repeated until his horse was exhausted. Los Ciboleros were mostly interested in gathering a sufficient supply of meat to carry their families through the winter. The hide and other parts were also used for other purposes. As the hides became more valuable in the states, and guns became plentiful, the Bison's numbers were quickly reduced from millions to almost extinction. After two hundred fifty years the Ciboleros disappeared along with the Bison.