

COWBOYS - VAQUEROS

Origins Of The first American Cowboys

Chapter 3

By **Donald Chávez Y Gilbert**

The Cowboy "Persona"

If Hollywood is to be credited with anything correct in documenting who the American cowboy was to evolve into, it was that indomitable, intrepid, persevering genetic stock which separated the weak from the strong. Indeed, it was the strongest that survived and those very survival instincts greatly contributed to the strength of American character which has made the USA the most powerful country on earth. To that end, after over four hundred years of immigration to the American southwest, the influence of all the contributing surviving races from virtually every corner of the earth can take varying degrees of credit. However, the principal players were a blend of Spanish, Indian, African, and more recently since the early 1800's, an influx of east coast Anglo and other Americans who have combined to shape today's modern American cowboy. When Hollywood left out the Spanish influence they omitted root stock that contained more than just a proud tough-guy will to survive.

This chronic oversight of Spanish dominance was characterized in 1883 by "...no less a poet than Walt Whitman, the gray-bearded singer of American democracy and the common man." *The Spanish West, Time Life Books Inc., 1976*. In describing the people of New Mexico preparing to celebrate the 333rd anniversary of the founding of their city of Santa Fe, the poet remarked, "We Americans have yet to really appreciate our antecedents. Thus far, impress'd by New England writers and schoolmasters, we tacitly abandon ourselves to the notion that our United States have been fashion'd from the British Isles only, and essentially from a second England only - which is a very great mistake." Whitman maintained that, "Anglo-Saxon Americans, with their aggressive practicality and their cultural chauvinism, already threaten excess," and that, "...something outside of them, and to counter balance them, is seriously needed." The poet declared that, "...character, literature, a society worth the name, are yet to be

establish'd, through a nationality of noblest spiritual, heroic, democratic attributes." Whiteman concluded;

"To that composite American identity of the future, Spanish character will supply some of the most needed parts. No stock shows a grander historical perspective - grander in religiousness and loyalty, or for patriotism, courage, decorum, gravity and honor. As to the Spanish stock of our Southwest, it is certain to me that we do not begin to appreciate the splendor and sterling value of its race element. Who knows but that element, like the course of some subterranean river, dripping invisibly for a hundred or two years, is now to emerge in broadest flow and permanent action?"

The first cowboys - vaqueros were, after all, descendants of a very select portion of Europeans. Unlike the colonists of the 13 almost original colonies who were fleeing tyranny and religious persecution, the Spaniards were aspiring noblemen and intrepid pioneers. These Spanish conquistadores who left their more genteel European cousins behind were ambitious, proud, ostentatious, religious, adventurous, courageous, intelligent, and cavalier. They put the grit and spirit of "I-CAN" into the word AmerI-Can; Juan de Onate and the colonists who ventured here with him and their descendants - the Juan Cortinas' and Andrew Garcias,' to name a couple. There are many of these descendants living in all parts of this country and all over the Americas. And there are still a few of these old fashioned, die-hard "Spanish" vaqueros left in the one place in the U.S. where blood and culture has been best preserved, rural New Mexico. There are still numerous families descended from the original first vaquero colonists who arrived in New Mexico with Juan De Onate in the summer of 1598. For more information on these vaquero / ranching families there are many resources such as, *Tough Trip Through Paradise, by Andrew Garcia, Edited by Bennett Stein, (1967, Houghton Mifflin)*; (The real "Little Big Man" was Andy Garcia -see Chapter 2 here, captioned, "Andrew Garcia, a True Frontiersman in Indian Country). Other resources include, *A Brief Multi-History, by Ruben Salaz Marquez, (1999, Cosmic House)*, *The Spanish Recolonization Of New Mexico, by Jose Antonio Esquvel and John B. Colligan, (Hispanic Genealogical Research Center of New Mexico)*, *El Rio Abajo, by Tibo Chavez & Gilberto Espinosa (Bishop Publishing)*, *Colony in the Wilderness by Robert McGeach, PhD, La Herencia Del Norte magazine, Santa Fe, New Mexico*, and www.herencia.com - to name a few.

For the most part, today's cowboy has not evolved into merely a rugged rancher and equestrian who know nothing else. The modern day country western cowboy does not restrict all of his life to the strict pursuits of ranching and rodeoing. Many a modern cowboy is as comfortable with his 'high-tech business, and computer as he is with his saddle, and tack. He exists side-by-side in a complimenting blend with the old Spanish and Indian ways in rural New Mexico.

Tejas, a "Head-On" Clash of Cultures

Unlike the New Mexico region where the melding of Vaquero ranching culture and the new English speaking American Anglos occurred gradually over many decades, in Texas, the infusion of Anglo American culture and Spanish / Mexican culture occurred in the painfully short span of a decade and a half, beginning with a stampede of American settlers and ending in the bloody deaths of hundreds of Mexicans and Anglos.

By the end of the 17th century Spain was losing its ability to hold onto its' territories in the Americas. Thinking that the powerful Napoleon would be able to keep the Americans at bay, Madrid secretly ceded all the Louisiana territory to France. To Spain's chagrin, France sold the same territory to the U.S. for \$15 million dollars, unleashing a wave of Americans that would not stop at that imaginary western edge of the Louisiana Purchase. The illegal (American) immigrant problem in Florida was so pervasive that Spain felt it had no other alternative but to sell Florida to the United States with the proviso that the U.S. would not allow the same illegal American migrant problem to recur in Tejas / Texas, which had fewer than 3000 Spanish / Mexican natives. Washington agreed. Whatever slim hope Spain had that it could trust Washington to keep its' promise was surely dashed when a man by the name of James Long organized 300 volunteers in Natchez, Mississippi to seize Texas for the United States. In 1819 he led his men into the border town of Nacogdoches, Tejas, seized it from the surprised citizens, declared it the capital of the "Republic of Texas," and installed himself as its' first president. Fearing reprisals from the Spanish government, he quickly left to recruit support from the French pirate Jean Lafitte. Lafitte refused to cooperate and in the time it took for Long to leave Texas, Spanish troops drove the intruders out and reclaimed Nacogdoches and Texas for Spain.

Shortly thereafter a Missouri man, Moses Austin, looking for a new start, traveled to Mexico City to obtain "official" permission to bring 300 American families to Texas. He offered the promise that all the Americans pledge their loyalty to Spain and the Catholic Church. Spanish authorities agreed and conditionally granted them a large parcel of land along the Texas Brasos River. As fate would have it, the colonization job would fall to his son, Stephen F. Austin, not yet 30 years old when Moses died.

These first successful English speaking settlers in the province of Tejas, (Texas), arrived in the year 1821 while Mexico was winning it's independence from Spain. This required that the young Austin repeat the journey to Mexico City to reaffirm their right to settle San Felipe de Austin, Texas. The new Mexican government, believing that the American settlers would provide some stability to the region and defense against the Indians, agreed to authorize the permanent colonization and went so far as to offer four years of tax deferred status to the Anglo settlers. Austin's group

relinquished their U.S. citizenship to become citizens of Mexico, the first English speaking Mexicans.

Texas was a completely foreign environment for them. Free ranging Long Horn cattle were so abundant that the new Anglo settlers needed only throw a rope and register a brand to become cattleman. Anglo Texans took cowboy lessons from the Mexican Tejano vaqueros who had been developing the sheep and cattle ranching industry in that region for almost 200 years, or by apprenticing to seasoned vaqueros as wranglers until they learned the "ropes." An avid student of the cowboy and ranching life, Austin and many other Mexican converts and Texans "to be" learned, and borrowed everything Mexican from their Vaquero teachers, the methods of working cattle, the vaquero clothes, music, and language. Even his registered brand bears a striking resemblance to the Christian crosses brand of Hernan Cortez (see figure #3).

Ranching spread through the U.S. Great Plains between 1865 and 1880. In 1868 construction on the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe railroads began in the south, aiming for the West Coast. Anglo settlers began establishing successful ranchos of their own. By 1869, Texans drove more than 300,000 head of cattle to the railhead in Abilene, Kansas for sale and shipment to their meat hungry families in the eastern U.S.A. This mounted cowboy method was in stark contrast to the system of using numbers of trained dogs commonly applied to manage the cattle by the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. in areas like Virginia, where in 1784 cattle from Virginia in small numbers, (less than 100 at a time) were being driven into the Ohio Valley for summer grazing. Texan transplant Davy Crockett, wrote in his auto biography that he took a herd of cattle 400 miles, afoot, across the mountains of Tennessee into Virginia.

Notwithstanding Stephen Austin's pledge to remain a loyal citizen of Mexico, they influx of illegal American squatters which grew exponentially, eventually caused the Mexican government to take more draconian steps to preserve Texas for Mexico. The final result forced even the most loyal Anglo-Mexicans to fight for their newly adopted lands. By the end of the decade over 7000 illegal American immigrants had arrived with their slaves. This was twice the Mexican born population. By 1835, the numbers of Americans illegally settling Texas increased to more than ten times the Mexican born population, 35,000 plus. When General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna was elected president of Mexico, Anglo-Texans petitioned the Mexican government to repeal the ban against the flow of illegal American immigrants, and separate itself from the state of Coahuila, Mexico. Stephen Austin was elected to carry the petition to Mexico City. According to Geoffrey C. Ward, in his book, *The West*, published by Little, Brown & Company, 1996, events moved more slowly than Austin liked.

...and he wrote an uncharacteristically blunt letter to the mostly Tejano city council of San Antonio. 'If our application is refused...', he said, 'I shall be in favor of organizing without it. I see no other way of saving the country from total anarchy and ruin. I am totally done with conciliatory measures and, for the future, shall be uncompromising as to Texas.' Santa Anna finally agreed to end the ban on American settlement, at least, but news of Austin's indiscrete letter made its way back to Mexico City. He was arrested and cap'd (sic) in jail for eighteen months.

When the Mexican government sent General Cos to the town of Gonzales to recover a brass cannon lent to the Texans for defense against the Indians, the Texans hung out a banner stating, "Come and Take It." The Texans fired the cannon into the Mexican soldiers as they advanced, thus starting the Texas revolution, and the beginning of a new style of cowboy spinning-off what they had learned from the Tejano vaqueros.