

COWBOYS - VAQUEROS

Origins Of The first American Cowboys

Chapter 6

By Donald Chavez Y Gilbert

The Role of the Saddle

According to James S. Hutchins, from the Dwight D. Eisenhower Institute for Historical Research, National Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560, "...it is probable that a large proportion of modern Americans, if put to the test, would identify an example of the western riding saddle on sight as a "cowboy" saddle. Should this prove to be the case among a people of whom by far the greater number have never had real contact with the horse or equestrian equipage, then much of the credit much go to Hollywood. Most of our notions about the cowboy and his appurtenances have come from the "westerns" of motion pictures and television."

Ahlborn goes on to say, "...looking back more than a century historians are aware that America's story owes something of significance to the "western saddle," even before the Anglo cowboy appeared in large numbers. The western stock saddle of Hispanic-Mexican origin, along with parallel innovations within American Indian societies, can be used as a device to describe and illuminate aspects of nineteenth-century American cultures." Indeed, the cowboy culture along with its' uninterrupted and continuous presence of the Hispanic influence lives on today in New Mexico, a land of vast open spaces which boasts lush riparian Rio Grande valley landscapes, high desserts, to the equally lush pine covered forest of the Sangre de Cristo Rocky Mountains. New Mexico has 6 of the 7 "life zones" of the North American continent. Along side the modern day working and part-time cowboys, there continues to thrive both Anglo and Hispanic Vaqueros on ranches, farms, and hobbyists all over the state of New Mexico. One cannot understand the culture of the early vaquero without understanding his relationship with his saddle. Ergo the metaphor - what the motorcar was to the American 20th century traveler, or working employee, (who used a car or truck to make a living), the saddle was to the American traveler and cowboy one to four hundred years immediately prior. What was under the hood, be it horses or horse power did not change much. Rather, it was the drivers' set and all its accouterments that we have obsessed about. Henry Ford mass produced the first motorcar and the Spanish Vaquero invented the first western cowboy saddle. "What we term the "western" saddle, Americans of the first half of the nineteenth century generally referred to as the "Spanish" saddle. Thus they showed their awareness of its place of origin. Americans of that time commonly used the term "Spanish" to

distinguish whatever related to New Spain-Mexico and her provinces to the north: Texas, New Mexico and California. And within the locus of the New World, it was specifically in Mexico," (which included modern day New Mexico), during her long centuries under Spanish rule that the western saddle originated and underwent a very great deal of its development. By the outset of the nineteenth century the saddle used by the horsemen of New Mexico was founded upon a saddletree incorporating practically all the elements of design by which the western tree is distinguished even today. As Arthur Woodward and others have shown, the Mexican caballero strove always to combine the practical and, insofar as his purse would allow, the elegant in his riding equipment."

For our purposes, we begin with the predecessors of the American western saddle, (brought by the Spanish), that the vaqueros had to work from. "By the early Middle Ages, Christian northern Spain was the recipient of several riding traditions: (1) ancient Celtic, (2) late Roman, (3) early Gothic European, and (4) Muslim. By 900 A.D. Spain is credited with having invented the rowel spur." Ibid.#1. By the time Spain had set sail for the West Indies in 1492, two basic styles had been adopted and brought to the Americas with the horse, a la estradiota, and la jineta. "The Moors successfully invaded Spain about 710 A.D. overrunning the country on light very fast horses. The Moslem cavalrymen rode a la jineta, with very short stirrups... He was lightly armored and therefore extremely fast and mobile."

From the 11th century West European institution of "chivalry," (which originally had the same meaning as "cavalry"), evolved the age of knighthood. The saddle of chivalry, (a la estradiota), Figure 4-A, click on the following for [1st Saddles Image](#), consisted of two large rigid bows, the rear end couching the pelvis of the rider, connected by wooden planks. The seat was padded on both sides between the rider and the horse. The fork swell or pommel rose high in front of the rider so as to protect the stomach from the force of the opposing jousting lance. The cantle was high enough to secure the rider from being forced over the rear of the horse and close enough to the pommel to further snugly secure the rider. It was from these models that the first vaqueros developed an American saddle to suit their own needs and preferences; for Figure 4-B, click on preceding "1st Saddle Image" above. From their research the saddle experts have a reasonably good idea how the western stock saddle evolved and appeared. However, because there are no surviving fully documented saddles from the colonial American Southwest and Mexico (1521-1821), other than a few inconclusive illustrations and literary references to the estradiota, jineta and later vaquero type saddles, there is no consistent agreement between authorities on exactly what the first vaquero saddle looked like. Given the old maxim that "necessity is the mother of invention," it is a reasonable assertion that, (1) there were as many prototypes as there were inventors, and (2) they began with the examples of the Spanish import, la estradiota, and la jineta, and blended the most practical features of each and allowed the personal experience and the conditions of the deserts of northern Mexico and Southwestern U.S. to shape what eventually began to look like a "functional" prototype for what became the Spanish American, then Mexican, and later American western

saddle. Alborn states that, "By 1600 the original conformation had begun to be modified in response to the challenge of branding and pasturing great herds of animals in unfenced areas of an extent undreamed of in Europe." According to Russell Beatie, "after the Spaniards in America discarded pike poles and hocking irons in handling cattle, they revived the use of the lariat... The saddle was rawhide-covered only. Later a small triangular piece of leather was tacked to the top of the bars, the apex of the triangle being tacked halfway up the front side of the cantle. This seat was called a half-rigged seat, (it has never been called a half seat)." The first saddle models had no saddle horn. The saddle horn was an innovation invented through necessity by creative Spanish and Mexican vaqueros. Livestock was first tied to the horse's tail. The horses surely having objected to towing anything larger than a sheep, vaqueros then tied the home end of their lariat to the "D" ring on the side rigging of the saddle. That proved less than efficient, so some ingenious vaquero invented a large wooden bulbous saddle horn cut from the same piece of saddle tree; also called a manzana or apple. The second Viceroy of New Spain claimed some credit for "la silla vaquero" the new vaquero saddle with a saddle horn for roping. It is my guess, however, that it was a "creative hands on" practical minded lesser known working vaquero who through trial and error invented the prototype of what eventually became the saddle horn. This first Spanish style (Livingston) saddle had no skirts and the stirrups were cut from one solid piece of wood. Beatie asserts that "...this early Spanish saddle was used, with only minor modifications, for 200 years." However, Figure #5-A, [click here for 2nd Saddle Image - Saddle Prototypes](#), which depicts a different general appearance of the first functional saddle during the Spanish/Mexican colonial period of the 16th century, is taken from the work of Jose Sisneros who illustrates the high cantle of the old Spanish war saddle and high bulbous horn used for roping. Indeed, both authorities may be correct assuming the Beatie version was the primitive antecedent that took from 75-100 years to evolve into the Sisneros version. It makes sense that the strong, (steer-proof), large wooded horn with thick neck, (Sisneros version), would have prevailed in a time when thin metal saddle horns would not have been readily available for saddle construction in remote areas. Over the next hundred years the saddle would begin to see changes and adaptations which bore an early semblance of what would be recognized as the American western stock saddle. By the early 17th century, the modified jineta saddle utilized by the first colonial Mexican stockmen had evolved into a distinctive national form: la silla vaquero mexicana. It became famous in the mid-19th century in the western United States as the vaquero saddle or Mexican cowboy saddle. This form displayed many variations, some regional and some occasioned by the taste and uses of it's owner, [click above on "2nd Saddle Image - Saddle Prototypes"](#) for Figure 5-B. One variety was sometimes called la silla charra, or charro saddle, [click on underlined text for Figure #6-A, 3rd Saddle Image - Saddle Styles](#). The influences of the early Mexican saddle have been preserved in large part in one of our local saddle styles, The Santa Fe saddle even in more contemporary times, [click above "3rd Saddle Image - Saddle Styles"](#) for Figure #6-B. Alborn indicates that "by the early decades of the 19th century, the Mexican (Vaquero) stock saddle had assumed the general appearance, of the stock saddle that was to become the standard in the western part of the United States,

another vast region where further regional modifications would continue to take place. The vaquero saddle was also the precursor of the "Texas" saddle), click above "3rd Saddle Image - Saddle Styles" for Figure #6-C, which included such modifications as double rigging.

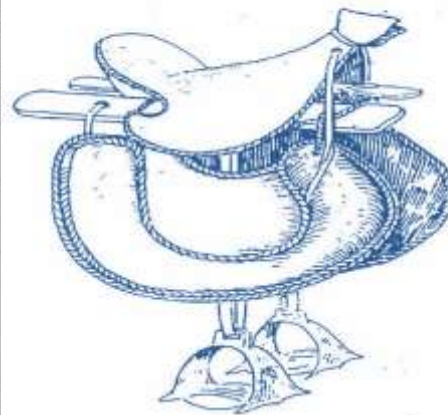
Thumbless Texans and the Saddlehorn

Many of the first generation of Anglo Cowboy Texans were thumbless. While neophyte cowboy Anglo Texans were taking cowboy lessons from their Mexican Vaquero teachers they were unable to *dale vuleta* like the seasoned Hispanic Mexicans. *Dale Vuelta*, (to tie the lariat around the saddle horn) is the correct way to say dally welter or just dally. Consequently, when they were not able to rope the steer, turn the rope around the saddle horn, then remove their thumb between the rope and horn before the animal pulled tight enough to cut off the digit, they lost their thumbs. This was the beginning of the Texan tradition of roping technique where the rope was first tied to the saddle horn, then lassoing the animal. To this day on occasion you will still come across a thumbless cowboy who lost his digit the same way. The one major change within the range of forms typical of the Mexican saddle occurred after 1875 as a result of the efforts of groups of *charros* - Mexican horsemen devoted to the art of the Mexicana riding style who were anxious to preserve the traditions and skills of authentic Mexican horsemanship. As a result of their efforts, *charrería* was organized into a national sport and is now a traditional part of the Mexican culture," as well as some parts of the U.S. Southwest.

FIGURE 4 - A
La Estradiota
Spanish War Saddle (Knights)



FIGURE 4 - B
La Jineteta
Moorish Cavalrymen Saddle



SADDLE PROTOTYPES

FIGURE 5-A
AMERICAN VAQUERO SADDLE PROTOTYPE
1600 - 1700'S

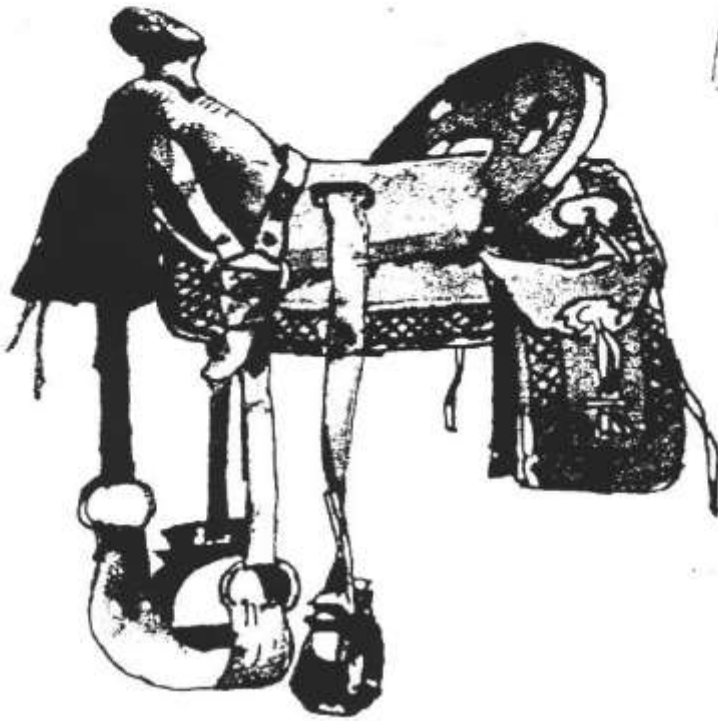
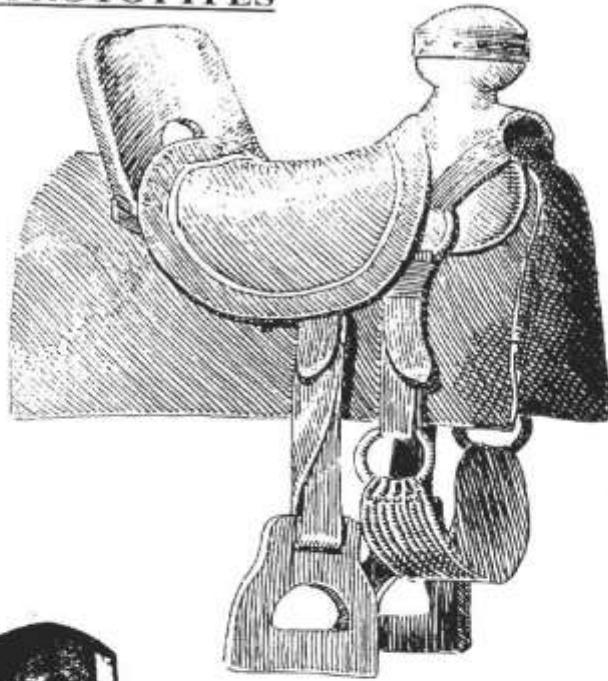
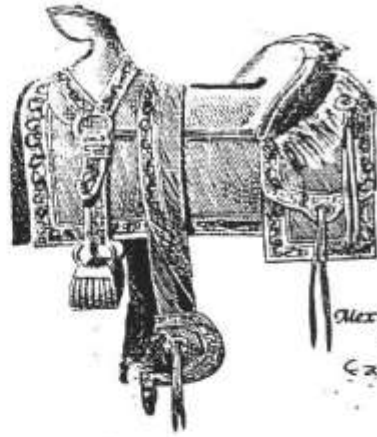


FIGURE 5-B
VAQUERO SADDLE
1700 - 1800'S

SADDLE STYLES

FIGURE 6 - A



Mexican Chirro Saddle
Early 1700s

Santa Fe Saddle
18th Century

FIGURE 6 - B

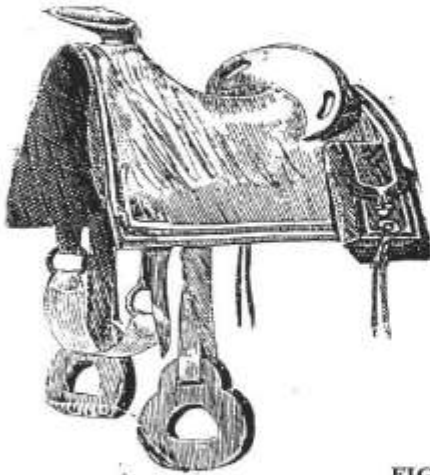


FIGURE 6 - C

Texas Saddle
Late 19th Century

