

COWBOYS - VAQUEROS

Origins Of The first American Cowboys

Chapter 8

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Chapter 8 Vaquero Clothes



By the time the Onate colonists arrived in New Mexico, the Spanish had almost one hundred years to adapt their clothes from aristocratic steel armor, expensive lace and high collared velvet to more common and practical clothing befitting of the natural terrain and climate. For those who could afford it, the formal dress not widely available on this continent was likely saved for special formal events and celebrations. Fortunately, the Spanish were already skilled at manufacturing leather goods and were able to utilize leather from both wild and domesticated animals to continue making such necessities as leather botas, (boots), chaquetas, (jackets), chalecos, (vests), chapareras, (chaps and leggings), and even the flat crowned wide brimmed hat, (bolero / Santa Fe style) was made of heavy leather. These leather tanning and leather working skills were passed on from generation to generation and as Spanish and Mexican families spread north and west these skills and styles were passed onto many of the early frontiersman like Andy Garcia and others who are known for their practical and fancy western leather outfits.

Two items of vaqueros clothing which have best endured over 6 centuries are the cowboy hat and cowboy boots. The botas, (boots), first arrived as high bucket leather boots secured above the knee with leather thongs or tassels, and like the noble and proud Spaniards of yesteryear, to this day we make fashion statements about our station in life by donning exquisitely made boots of the most expensive and exotic leather. Instead of wearing ostrich feathers in our hats, we are wearing ostrich leather on our boots. Because it is so functional, comfortable and stylish, it is still virtually the same boot that arrived with the Spanish settlers and was adapted and perfected by the Mexicans. According to Jerry Padilla in the Spring issue of La Herencia magazine, "...the conquistadores who could afford them continued to use leather boots. The pointed toed, high-heeled and high-toped, tight fitting boot has been perfected by the Moors in Andalusia. Designed for use by those spending large amounts of time mounted, and for working cattle, the style continued to be perfected in the Hispanic Southwest. The fancy stitching and lacing is a reflection of Arabic geometric art forms." The vast flocks of sheep made readily available wool for producing clothes and blankets. Underwear, (except wool socks), like shirts and pantaloons depended on their ability to grow cotton, because cotton fabric and other imported goods arrived in caravans from Mexico about every 8 years. No doubt, the Spanish and Indians borrowed ideas and methods from each other. For example, those colonists who could not afford boots or did not have materials available to make them, adopted soft leather moccasin-style tegua boots made from buckskin or gamuza. Jerry Padilla tells us that some, "...claim that the fine shawls and broomstick skirts used by New Mexican Native American women with native modifications are influenced by Spanish styles introduced by colonial women... Some older women still prefer to wear a form of mantilla to church."

The end of the U.S. Mexican War in 1848 marked the most significant adoption of ranching culture to the non-Hispanic U.S.A. Anglo Texans copied everything Mexican which had to do with ranching, even down to the styles of the bandidos and desperados. The old Spanish/Mexican Corriente cattle were renamed Texas Longhorns, New Mexico mules were transported to Saint Louis and renamed the Missouri Mule, and the Spanish/Muslim horses bred for rugged ranching life and refined by the Mexican Vaqueros were renamed American Cow Ponies.

Mexican vaquero attire was adopted as Anglo American cowboy dress. From the word "sombra" (shade) derived the word "sombbrero," the Mexican cowboy hat. The barbiquejo or chin strap held the sombrero in place. Under his sombrero he wore a bandana or kerchief over his head, sometimes with hair combed back and parted in the middle, ending in a braid. The sarape or poncho was carried on the back of the saddle or worn over the vaquero's shoulder. It offered protection from rain and cold. It was used as a bedroll tied with leather straps and eventually evolved into the



modern sleeping bag. From the wealthy hacendado to the poorest peon - all vaqueros took pride in their appearance and trappings of his horse.

One of the many less than successful attempts of Texans to translate old Spanish "westernisms" is the term - "Ten Gallon Hat." The Mexican Sombrero, (festooned hat) was properly called "el sombrero galoneado." The term "gallon" was derived from the word "galoneado," and the word "ten" adopted to denote a size "LARGE." "A Mexican caballero, or gentlemen on a horse, was such a sight to behold that Josiah Gregg, an early visitor from Missouri," (early 1800's), "...felt compelled to describe the outfit from top to bottom: The riding costume generally consists of a sombrero - a peculiarly shaped low crowned hat with a wide brim - surmounted with a band of tinsel cord nearly an inch in diameter; a chaqueta or jacket of cloth gaudily embroidered with braid and fancy barrel buttons; a curiously shaped article called calzoneras intended for pantaloons, with the outer part of the leg open from hip to ankle - with the borders set with tinling filigree buttons and the whole fantastically trimmed with tinsel lace. The nether garment is supported by a rich sash which is drawn very tightly around the body and contributes materially to render the whole appearance of the Caballero extremely picturesque. Then there are the botas which somewhat resemble the leggings worn by the bandits of Italy, and the fancy blanket, completes the picture. This peculiarly useful garment is commonly carried dangling carelessly across the pommel of the saddle, except in bad weather when it is drawn over the shoulders, or the rider puts his head through a slit in the middle, his whole person is thus effectually protected. The standard dress for women was a short, full, brightly colored skirt topped off with a loose, low-cut blouse and a rebozo, or head scarf." Following the three hundred year history of Hispanic development of the cowboy hat and boots, J.B. Stetson designed his first western hat in 1863, and Hyer Boot Company became the first American manufacturer of high heeled cowboy boots.

In Northern Mexico and New Mexico, vaqueros wore short wasted chaqueta's (jacket) which preceded the cowboy's short denim jacket. His chaqueta was adorned with braid embroidery, and fancy buttons down the sides to match his pantalones (pants) and on the pocket flaps. Tight fitting pants buttoned down the sides were worn inside high leather botas (boots), or over lower boots canted over the boot front. A scabbard was strapped to his right lower leg to hold his long knife. Footwear ranged anywhere from bare feet, huaraches and buckskin moccasins to the over-the-knee leather boots, with spurs.

The dress of Los Ciboleros was characterized by leather boots, pants and jacket topped off with a flat straw hat. On his shoulder he wore a bow with arrow filled quiver, and across his saddle he carried a long handled 14 inch steel lance decorated with brightly colored tassels.