



# THE MORGAN'S ROLE OUT WEST CELEBRATED AT VAQUERO HERITAGE DAYS 2012

By Brenda L. Tippin

*Stories of cowboys and the old west have always captivated Americans with their romance. The California vaquero was, in fact, America's first cowboy and the Morgan horse was the first American breed regularly used by many of these early vaqueros. Renewed interest in the vaquero style of horsemanship in recent years has opened up huge new markets for breeders, trainers, and artisans, and the Morgan horse is stepping up to take his rightful place as an important part of California Vaquero Heritage.*

## THE MORGAN CONNECTION

The Justin Morgan horse shared similar origins with the horses of the Spanish conquistadors, who were the forefathers of the vaquero traditions. The Conquistador horses, brought in by the Moors, carried the blood of the ancient Barb, Arab, and Oriental horses—the same predominant lines which may be found in the pedigree of Justin Morgan in Volume I of the Morgan Register. In recent years, the old style foundation Morgan has gained in popularity

and is becoming more widely recognized as what is known as the “baroque” style horse, along with such breeds as the Andalusian, Lippizan, and Kiger Mustangs, which are all favored as being most like the horse of the Conquistadors. These breeds have the powerful, deep rounded body type; graceful arched necks set upright, coming out of the top of the shoulder; and heavy manes and tails similar to the European paintings of the Baroque period, which resemble today's original type Morgans to a remarkable degree.

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*Above: An historic painting by James Walker (1819-1889) shows a type of horse very familiar to Morgan lovers being used by early day vaqueros on the expansive ranchos of California. Common to the Morgan and to the “Spanish” horses depicted is a laid back shoulder and high placed, well-curved neck that allows the horse to carry a spade bit. Vaquero Heritage Days celebrate that history and, in the process, the role played in it by the Morgan horse.*



In Volume I of the Morgan Register we also find that the dam of Justin's son Sherman Morgan, was described by George Sherman as being "of Spanish breed." Joseph Battell, author of the Morgan Register, goes on to say, "The horses of Spain are largely derived from across the narrow straits of Morocco, the home of the Barb, of which the Godolphin Arabian was doubtless a specimen. Of the horses to be seen in the City of Mexico at the present day, some bear a striking resemblance to the Morgans of the Sherman line. We noticed the same, too, of the best specimens of native stock we saw in California."

Meanwhile, aside from the Morgan sharing many traits in common with the Spanish horse of the early vaqueros, many actual Morgan horses began making their way westward with wagon trains to California and finding work as vaquero horses on the large ranchos as early as 1849. In contrast, the American Quarter Horse was not recognized as a breed until 1940. A number of these early California Morgans are recorded in Volume I of the Morgan register. The horse David Hill 2d, for example, was a grandson of old Black Hawk, who was taken overland to California in 1860 by J.G. McCracken and kept at Sacramento, winning first premium at the California State Fair in 1864, 1866, and in 1868 shown with ten

of his get. McCracken was said to have refused an offer of \$10,000 in gold for this horse at a time when gold was worth \$2.50 in paper. This was a tremendous amount of money for a horse in those days.

Another was the highly regarded St Clair, a grandson of Barden Morgan (Cock Of The Rock [Sherman x daughter of Justin Morgan] x daughter of Justin Morgan), who was taken across the plains to California in 1849. He was advertised as a Morgan and did a large business at stud, leaving 600 to 700 colts. Unfortunately most of these were never registered, and it is likely that many more Morgans arrived in California whose record was lost to history.

The greatest cattle baron of all time was Henry Miller, who died in 1916 at the age of 88 without reaching his goal of owning the entire state of California. However, at the time of his death, he did own 1,250 square miles of it, along with nearly as much in Oregon and half as much in Nevada. Miller & Lux ranches, as well as some of the Flint & Bixby ranches, the H. Moffatt ranch, and many others, continued to operate and employ vaqueros through the 1930s and 1940s and used Morgans extensively for their work. Registered Morgans who were trained by California vaqueros, and whose descendants make up the Western Working Morgan of today, include those of Roland Hill and William Randolph Hearst.

Above (left to right): Bruce Sandifer and Montana Half Moon;  
Jo Johnson on JaF Sunrise Surfer Dude and Richard Caldwell on RC Vaca Caballo. Photos by Mary Ann Schafer.

## VAQUERO HERITAGE DAYS



Clockwise from top left: Col. John Hutchison, JaF Sunrise Surfer Dude and Vaquero Horsman Bruce Sandifer; Entertainer Dave Stamey and VHD event director Jane Merrill; Jo Johnson and Surfer Dude. Photos by Lynn Brown & Mary Ann Schafer.



### VAQUERO HERITAGE DAYS EVENT

Vaquero Heritage Days (VHD) 2012 featured Vaquero style horseman demonstrations and provided educational background on the importance of the Morgan breed to the California vaqueros, as well as showcasing a wide array of artisan booths presenting the work of saddle makers and silversmiths, bits and spurs, vaquero trappings, art, entertainment, and more.

Among the vaquero horsemanship presenters was Morgan breeder Jo Johnson and her beautiful palomino stallion JaF Sunrise Surfer Dude (Can Don Joshua Danny x Ursula's Higuera Bandita), who served as an impressive ambassador for the Morgan breed. Also presenting were highly regarded Vaquero Horsemen Bruce Sandifer and Richard Caldwell.

Jane Merrill, Director of the VHD event, notes, "Although neither Richard nor Bruce actually work Morgans today, they both recognize the breed's significance and role in earlier ranching times, those thousands of open range acres where vaqueros often preferred the Morgan for its durability and athletic strength."

Richard has an extensive performance record of his own, and has trained many horses who have won over a million dollars in cow horse events. He has been featured a number of times in *Western Horseman* magazine, including appearing on the March 2010 cover with his horse RC Vaca Caballo, which he also used for this demonstration.

Jane further adds, "Richard [with close to 40 years of buckaroo

experience throughout the Great Basin area plus Utah & Idaho] speaks of Morgan crosses still being preferred today by many Nevada vaqueros where the breed is matched for the work on vast ranchlands. He continues to see the value of the Morgan stock horse and supports the breed's qualities. He especially supports and promotes Jo Johnson's efforts in breeding and training Morgan stock horses at her 'Jaquima a Freno' facility."

Bruce Sandifer, a friend of Ray Ordway ("Dean of the Living Vaqueros," *TMH*, March 2010), instructs Classical Californio Horsemanship at his Vaquero Canyon Ranch in Santa Barbara, and makes most of his own gear including bits, braided rawhide reatas, bosals, and horsehair mecate. Bruce was interested to meet "Hutch," (Col. John Hutchison), whose cover photo and article on his Wyoming pack trip were featured in *The Morgan Horse*, March 2012, (copies of which were available at VHD to help promote the Morgan stock horse), and was seriously discussing the idea of sending one of his mares to breed to Hutch's Morgan stallion, PKR Primavera Brio.

### MORGAN PRESENTATION AT VAQUERO HERITAGE DAYS 2012

This year's VHD event marks the first time the Morgan horse has been publicly recognized for being a valued part of California's vaquero heritage. Morgan breeder Jo Johnson was featured with her stallion JaF Sunrise Surfer Dude, a rare and beautiful example of



**Clockwise from top left:** Ray Ordway (photo by Mary Ann Schafer); The original Mission Plaza where Bear and Bull fights were held as it is today (photo by Jane Merrill); A historic photo of the SJB Mission and plaza (photo courtesy San Juan Bautista book by Charles W. Clough); A Horse Drive down San Juan Bautista's main street, documenting a mixture of Spanish horses, Morgans and Thoroughbred stock in the very early 1900s (photo courtesy San Juan Bautista Historical Society).

Western Morgan breeding. He is a great grandson of the legendary Tio Lalo (Mahan Field x Palomesa) and tracing his sireline through Roland Hill's famous bridle horse Sonfield (Mansfield x Quietude) who was featured on a 1940 cover of *Western Horseman* magazine. At that time, Sonfield was head of the Morgan stud for Hill's Quinto Ranch in Gustine, CA. Additionally, Surfer Dude boasts a carefully woven blend of the most highly regarded old western Morgan lines with numerous crosses to Hill, Hearst, and Sellman breeding, old Brunk through Red Vermont; Dapper Dan; Ern Pedler's famous Flying Jubilee; Jackson Ranch; and LU Sheep Ranch breeding.

Surfer Dude, a six-year-old palomino bred and trained by Jo Johnson, is still working in the hackamore and, for this presentation, Jo purposely used a hackamore with less than optimal fit. This was to better allow Richard Caldwell to explain how the hackamore works, and the importance of fitting the bosal just above the nasal cavity so it fits across the bony part of the horse's nose rather than lower down where there is more cartilage and soft tissue, which can eventually cause scar tissue, so the horse will be less responsive. Richard also used Surfer Dude to demonstrate how he would choose and fit a spade bit to this particular horse by checking the shape of his mouth and palate. The spade is not a leverage bit, but a signal bit, which gives the horse something to hold onto and keep him relaxed. Richard tried several, holding them up to demonstrate how the fit would work, and finally finding one he liked, Surfer Dude promptly took it and happily began rolling the cricket.

Also, Jo's strategy of hackamore choice resulted in Bruce Sandifer bringing out another hackamore, with bosal and mecate he had made, to offer a better fit. Meanwhile, Ray Ordway quickly took Jo's hackamore and, with expert hands, made some adjustments and retied the mecate so it would fit perfectly. Ray also showed Jo his special trick for tying up the mecate to use as a lead rope.

## VAQUERO HERITAGE DAYS – HISTORY

The original VHD 2010 event benefitted Old Mission San Juan Bautista's Preservation Fund, drawing some 1,000 visitors for the two-and-a-half day event. This year's event drew nearly 1,500 visitors with proceeds to benefit the historic St. Francis Retreat Center. This was the site of the historic Flint & Bixby ranch house built in 1863. It is significant, because not only did Flint & Bixby dominate for 40 years as the largest landowner in California, but they were among the first large ranchos to bring in Morgan horses for their vaqueros to use. St Francis Retreat is part of the San Juan Bautista Mission established in 1797 as the fifteenth of the 21 California Missions. It is the site of the only Spanish plaza remaining in California. Early mission vaqueros tended sheep, cattle, and horses—including many Morgans—on these vast ranch lands which were a part of original Mission lands. Mexican rule began in 1822, and the site became part of the old Mexican Land grant of 1836, which comprised the 34,615 acre Rancho San Justo.

Jane Merrill, the event organizer for Vaquero Heritage Days,

notes that the site is truly old Mission land where the earliest vaqueros actually rode, roped, lived, specifically two miles from the Mission itself. This allowed them to walk, ride, or travel in carts weekly to the Mission, which remained the heart of their lives. Many baptisms, services, fiestas—as well as vaquero horsemanship competitions, and bear & bull fights, all of which early Morgan horses participated in— took place right on the large green grassy plaza area which is the same size and area today as it was when Mission was founded in 1797.

The vaquero culture, a time honored training process that would take the horse through the *jaquima* (hackamore), two-rein and spade bit, was honed to a fine art through California's early Mission and Rancho eras, and up through the 1940s, as light and flexible whisper-reined horses were key to managing the great herds of cattle that dominated the landscape. These traditions of using the centerfire saddle, hand-braided rawhide reata, jaquima, and spade bit were carefully handed down from one mentor to the next. Following World War II, many of the big ranchos were sold and demand for vaquero skills declined, and might have been lost but for the dedication of a few men such as Arnold Rojas, Bab Verdugo, Ray Ordway—all men who respected and used Morgan horses in their vaquero work—and a few others who worked hard to ensure they would not be forgotten. Thanks to the single-minded loyalty of men such as these, the vaquero style of horsemanship has experienced a rebirth in popularity during recent years, becoming legendary worldwide. At the same time, the Morgan horse is once more coming to the forefront as the original American breed preferred by the California vaquero.

### LOS VIEJO SABIOS

Another feature of the event included recognition for “*Los Viejo Sabios*,” Ray Ordway, Jack Swanson, and Ernie Morris. Ray (*featured in March 2010, The Morgan Horse, “Dean of the Living Vaqueros”*), who recently celebrated his 88<sup>th</sup> birthday, is widely known and highly regarded for his expert use of the reata. Ray was especially honored for his lifetime as a vaquero horseman who has always preferred Morgans. Artist Jack Swanson, who also worked with many of the last great vaqueros, is respected as one of the few fine artists today who never use photo references for his work—his famous studio with its indoor horse stall allows him to create oil paintings and bronze sculptures from life which are in high demand. Ernie Morris, yet another lifetime vaquero and close friend of Ray Ordway, is recognized as an author, artist, and skilled rawhide braider.

### VHD ENTERTAINERS

Entertainers for VHD featured Dave Stamey; Adrian Brannan, “Buckaroo Girl”; and Jessica Hedges. Dave, a cowboy, mule packer, and dude wrangler who has been called “The Charley Russell of Western Music,” has won many awards from the Western Music Association, and is one of the most popular Western entertainers working today. Adrian, an amazingly talented singer and songwriter with a beautiful voice, is just 20 years old, and has been writing and singing her cowgirl songs since the age of fourteen. She has produced several popular albums and keeps herself busy with a full performance schedule. Jessica, known as Oregon's Cowboy Poet, has been acclaimed for her original poetry based on real life stories

of “cow camp” living, ranching, riding, working cattle and training dogs—all from a woman's point of view.

### SPECIAL GUESTS

Other Special Guests were William Matthews, and Bill Reynolds. William Matthews is known especially for his spectacular watercolors of timeless landscapes and scenes documenting the working cowboy of the American west, has been hailed as the new Remington of American painting.

Jane Merrill notes, “Matthews spent the day with Ray Ordway August 29 discussing Ordway's family vaquero history and involvement with Morgan stock horses in the late 1800s. This was an excellent opportunity for Matthews to get true California vaquero facts from the most respected “working vaquero” there is—Ray Ordway, plus hear more about the valuable aspects the Morgan breed brought to the early vaquero era, and meet Ray's Morgan horse, “Henry”—HMSTD Shuda Bin A Cowboy (R-Two Little Zipper x Shehana Reflection).

Bill Reynolds, an icon of western media has a long list of achievements relating to western heritage traditions, including reprinting the books of legendary vaquero Arnold Rojas which feature many references to Morgan horses on the old California ranchos. Bill also served as equine technical advisor for several movies, including the hit movie *The Horse Whisperer* with Robert Redford. Bill was also deeply impressed with Ray Ordway's story and the role of the Morgan horse in California vaquero history, and has plans to reprint the Ray Ordway article (TMH, *March 2010*) in his *Ranch & Reata* journal which he publishes.

Jane Merrill, the event director, retired from a 26-year career in corporate marketing management to focus her skills on her passion, the western heritage tradition. Jane operates Southwest Roundup Studio Gallery in addition to a Marketing Management & Consulting business handling selected artists and non-profit organizations which seek expertise related to traditional western art and events. She is creating a film documentary which will include the VHD event and the Morgan presentation. Jane owns JaF Mendocino Maverick, a half-brother to Jo's horse Surfer Dude, by the same sire, the late Can Don Joshua Danny.

Jo, who owns JaF Morgans in Sanger, CA, explained that her prefix JaF stands for *Jaquima a Freno*—meaning hackamore to bridle. Jo notes that Morgans have a long history of being bridle horses as well as having the conformation, mentality, and physical aptitude to do the job. She prefers the Morgans because they have the good feet and legs needed for the country she rides in, a natural neck-set that makes them well suited to become bridle horses, and a strong work ethic. The old foundation Morgan lines are strong in the type and conformation best suited for ranch work, although she adds you do have to make sure to choose lines with a well-defined wither which is necessary for keeping the saddle on when riding in steep country. Most of these lines also have a natural ability to work cattle.

Throughout the presentation, Surfer Dude gave an excellent impression of the Morgan breed and his usefulness as a vaquero horse to the large crowd by remaining calm, quiet, and perfectly responsive, showing remarkable manners for a stallion and helping to make the event a huge success. ■