COMPADRES: THE CALIFORNIA VAQUERO AND THE MORGAN HORSE

Once the standard for working cow horses on the huge ranches of California, the Vaquero ways have recently been revived by steadfast practitioners of the detailed and nearly lost art. The Morgan breed has been in the thick of it—then and now.

By Gail Perlee

The story of the enduring working partnership between the California vaquero and the Morgan horse is entwined with the history of the state and the complicated relationships between its Hispanic, Anglo, and Native peoples. It sheds light on the history and development of the cattle business and horse culture in the far West. The romantic tale of the vaquero and his fine, Morgan reined cow horse had its roots in medieval Spain, and continued as a living tradition well into the middle of the 20th century.

By the time Morgan horses arrived in California during the Gold Rush of 1849, the vaquero tradition was long established and had been passed down from generation to generation for almost 100 years. The vaquero way of working cattle and training cow horses had its roots in Spanish cavalry mounted on Spanish horses and their descendants. Starting in 1769, what began with the Spanish conquest of Mexico was carried north into what is now California. An expedition led by Don Gaspar de Portola and Father Junipero

ABOVE: *Roping Wild Horses* by James Walker, 1875, oil on canvas (Wikimedia commons).

ABOVE: Ray, Kent and Jack Ordway, Merced, California, 1950.

Serra, the founder of the first California missions, included priests, soldiers, cattle, mules, and forty-five horses. Portola claimed the new land for Spain and was appointed governor of Alta California. He led his soldiers to subdue the native peoples, convert them to Christianity, and mold them into often unwilling laborers for the new missions. When the De Anza expedition arrived in 1776, bringing 24 settlers and more livestock, there were already five missions along the Camino Real and the horse population had grown to 95. Working in almost total isolation, the friars, Indios, and soldiers built the missions into thriving, self-sufficient communities. Eventually there were 21 Spanish missions in Alta California. Far from the Spanish government in Mexico City, they built, crafted, or grew almost everything they needed. Soon thousands of cattle and horses ranged their vast land holdings, tended by Indian and mestizo vaqueros. And all of it was dedicated to serving the faith and the Franciscan fathers who preached it.

THE ERA OF THE GREAT RANCHOS

When Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, the missions were secularized and most of the soldiers and priests departed. The Mexican government redistributed the mission holdings through land grants, and the era of the California ranchos began. By 1834, there were about 400,000 cattle and 60,000 horses grazing the rich grasslands. In fact, there were so many feral horses that they became a nuisance and were sometimes killed to clear the range. Even cattle had little value beyond the few needed for food and leather for a sparse population. Then the tall ships of the Yankees began to arrive. They sailed from New England around the horn of South America to trade for cowhides and tallow for candles. The ranchos and their vaqueros were ready to supply that demand. The vaqueros had long since become experts in working wild cattle on the open range. Decades of isolation and impossibly long supply lines meant that they had learned to make do. They designed and made their own equipment from whatever was available. They braided long, rawhide reatas and designed and fashioned their own saddles and bridles from wood, leather, and horsehair. Metal was scarce and expensive so knots were often used instead of buckles. Bits were at first imported and later made locally. Clothing was basic and practical, but over time a distinctive look and style evolved. The vaqueros developed their own ways of handling wild cattle and training their small, quick, tough horses. Eventually, their specialized horse equipment and training methods differed widely from both European and American traditions. The California vaquero was a whole new kind of horseman.

The one area where the vaqueros did not have to compromise, at least in the early years, was horseflesh. Their mounts were the direct, undiluted descendants of the horses of the Spanish conquistadors. The Spanish horse was already an ancient breed when it came to the Americas. Since Roman times, north-African horses had been brought into southern

ABOVE: Merle Little in vaquero dress mounted on Sun Down Morgan in spade bit and bosalito.

Europe, and when the Moors invaded Spain from Africa, in 711 AD, they were mounted on small, handsome, agile Barbs. The Moors literally ran circles around the Spanish cavalry on their big, armored war horses. They occupied and ruled Spain until they were driven out in the 1400s. The Moors influenced many aspects of Spanish life and culture, including horsemanship and the development of the Spanish horse, which was a cross between Barbs and the larger European forest horses. During the middle ages and the Renaissance, Spanish horses were highly prized and sought out by the military and aristocrats throughout Europe. They were the ancestors of the Lipizzaners of Austria's Spanish Riding School and figured in the development of many other European breeds. Today their blood still runs in the veins of the Andalusian, and the Lusitano breeds of Spain and Portugal. Given their excellence, it seems strange that no attempts were apparently made to selectively breed the Spanish horse in California. But once established on the rich grasslands, there were so many of them that they were simply caught wild and broke to saddle, as needed. This lack of planned breeding and the rigors of living wild resulted in a gradual loss of size, quality and beauty, but the *mestenos* gained added toughness and endurance, and the ability to live off the land. Properly trained, they were superb cow horses and perfectly suited to the needs of the vaqueros. The best of them had the neat heads, high arched necks, and fiery spirit of their ancestors. The vaqueros were proud men who knew it was their destiny to sit a handsome, spirited, and well-reined horse.

In 1848, Mexico lost a war with the United States and was forced to give up much of its northern territory, including Alta California. The short period between the departure of the Spaniards in 1821 and the coming of the Anglos was the golden age of the great Hispanic ranchos and saw the full flowering of the vaquero as a master horseman with his own training techniques, equipment, and traditions. In the isolated, pastoral setting of the ranchos, the vaquero had the means and the time to perfect his art. Such was the fame of these vaqueros that, in 1832, John Parker, founder of the great Parker Ranch in Hawaii, brought three California vaqueros over to help corral his feral cattle and horses and teach the natives to ride and rope. They learned their lessons well and the Hawaiian paniolos became legendary cowboys, whose traditions still reflect the vaquero influence. The word paniolo sounds like Espanol, which was what their vaquero teachers were called. A little more than a hundred years later, between 1937 and 1967, the Parker Ranch upgraded its cow ponies by importing five Morgan stallions from California ranches. From then on, the paniolos were mounted on horses closely related to those used by many California vaqueros, and probably quite similar to the ones once ridden by their long ago Hispanic vaquero mentors.

ARRIVAL OF THE ANGLOS

The era of the great Hispanic ranchos came to an abrupt end with the beginning of the Gold Rush and the mass influx of Anglos starting in 1849. Over time, the ranchos were broken up as the land once more changed hands. There was a growing need for cattle

ABOVE: Don McDaniel and Lippitt Morman.

to supply leather, tallow, and beef for the growing population of miners and settlers. The vaqueros were a ready-made, skilled work force. The Americans marveled at their ways with cattle and horses and hired them to work the new ranches. The vaqueros adapted just as they always had. First they had been the serfs of the missions, then the mainstay of the ranchos, and now the poorly paid cowboys of the Anglos. But they were proud men who knew their true value. They continued to ply their trade and pass their knowledge and traditions on to future generations of vaqueros. One thing that started to change for the vaqueros was the horses. Out of necessity, the miners and settlers who flooded across the plains and into California brought horses with them. And almost immediately the 49ers who struck it rich began to import blooded stallions to sire fast trotters, fancy carriage horses, and roadsters. Harness racing was all the rage in America from the 1840s, until after the turn of the 20th century it was the most popular sport in the country. In the 1840s and '50s, long before the development of the Standardbred, the Morgan was the harness horse of choice for both road and track. At least 60 Morgan stallions and an unknown number of Morgan mares were brought into California between 1849 and 1900. The first ones came across the plains. Later they were loaded onto steamships in New England, shipped south, taken across the Isthmus of Panama, reloaded onto ships to be taken up the coast to San Francisco. Gold was the cargo on the return trip. Some of the Morgan stallions sired hundreds of foals and all were crossed with both native and Yankee mares. For instance, the Morgan stallion St Claire, who came across the plains in 1849 pulling a wagon in front of an ox team, sired more than 700 get in California. Since there were relatively few American mares in the state at that time, he probably sired most of his foals on Spanish mares. The great majority of the Morgan stallions that came to California were sons or grandsons of Black Hawk. He was by Sherman who was by Justin Morgan. It is interesting to note here that the dam of Sherman, the most prolific son of Justin Morgan, was described as "of Spanish breed." Black Hawk was a trotting champion and sire of harness racers and fancy roadsters all across the country. Given Black Hawk's Spanish blood, his sons and grandsons must have crossed especially well with the Spanish mares of California. Among the wealthy men who imported Morgan stallions were investor and rancher James Ben Ali Haggin and stagecoach operator Jesse Carr, who were partners in the Kern County Land Company. The huge Miller and Lux ranches headquartered in the San Joaquin Valley imported stallions of several breeds, including Morgans, to upgrade their horses. Because there were few Morgan mares in California before 1900 and the first Morgan Register was not published until 1894, the blood of those 60 Black Hawk stallions was lost to the Morgan breed. Later some of their descendants were used in the development of the Standardbred in the West, especially in the stock of Leland Stanford, and their blood survives in today's harness racers. On the major cattle ranches, Morgan genes blended well with the Spanish mustangs, and without a doubt many vaqueros were mounted on Morgan blooded cow horses well into the early years of the 20th Century.

ABOVE: Famed rancher Roland Hill & Joaquin Morgan 7947.

MORGANS RETURN TO CALIFORNIA RANCHES

Purebred Morgans did not return to California until the 1920s. The vaqueros were still practicing their ancient craft, but now they mostly worked for Anglo cattle ranchers. Some of the big, well-financed operations were trying to upgrade their cow horses. They wanted tough, "cowy," trainable horses that could work in rough terrain, and do it day after day. And they could afford the best. One of the first to bring in Morgans was Reginald H. Parsons, a wealthy Seattle financier, who owned the Mountcrest ranch, near the Oregon border at Hilts, California. He sent to Texas for a Morgan stallion, Baldie's Boy, and 12 mares from the famous Sellman ranch. Richard Sellman had been raising and using his own Morgan cow horses in west Texas since the late 1880s. His horses were well-known and respected among Texas ranchers and throughout the West. Sellman sold many young studs to other Texas ranches, including the JA, SMS, Matador, and Tom Burnett's Triangle ranch, to upgrade their stock horses. The California ranchers were different in that they tended to buy mares as well as stallions, and often registered the offspring. Parson's venture was short lived and he had sold most of his Morgan breeding stock by 1926. One of the first colts he registered, Mountcrest Sellman (Joe Bailey x Kitty E), was sold south into vaquero country to become herd sire at William Randolph Hearst's Piedmont Land & Cattle Company.

The next two ranches to get Morgan cow horses were deep in the heart of vaquero country. The Fickert family had been ranching in Kern County since 1869. In 1922, Frederick A Fickert brought in a boxcar of 15 Sellman Morgans, 14 mares and a stallion named Raven Chief (Morgan Chief #6884 x Baby Girl). That same year rancher Roland Hill of Tehachapi bought 22 Sellman mares and the stallion, Redwood Morgan. But before making such a big investment, Hill had purchased two Sellman geldings to test out. One was Czar, who became a celebrated cutting horse. It was said that before he was eight years old he had cut 10,000 head of cattle. He was then sold to a leading California reinsman for $800, a previously unheard of price for a cow horse gelding. Czar went on to win many reining contests, and his owner later refused an offer of $1,500 for him. The other gelding, Fearless, was Roland Hill's personal mount for almost 20 years, and died in retirement on the ranch. Between 1923 and Sellman's death in 1925, Hill bought another 17 Texas Morgan mares. He soon became the largest producer of Morgan horses in the country, and held that title until his death in 1955. In all, Hill bred about 600 registered Morgans on his California and Nevada ranches.

Roland Hill was born in the Cummings Valley in Kern County in 1886. His father, Ross Hill, had been ranching there since 1892. Due to his father's ill health, Roland left school at 16 and began working the family ranch. Ross died in 1904 leaving the 2,080-acre ranch to Roland and his brother Russell. The Hill brothers soon parlayed their small family ranch into a major cattle empire, which included the Tehachapi Land & Cattle Co. and Horseshoe Cattle Co. in California, and the TS ranch which covered three counties in Nevada, as well as feedlots and various other cattle

LEFT TO RIGHT: Roland Hill graced the cover of *The Morgan Horse* magazine's June 1948 issue; The Morgan stallion Sonfield, ridden by Roland Hill's daughter Jean Hill, was not only a finished bridle horse, he was a revered breeding stallion whose descendants have been able to carry a spade bit.

operations. According to Roland Hill's granddaughter, Rolie Graye, the horses used on their ranches prior to the Morgans were mostly Spanish mustangs that were caught wild and broken in by the vaqueros. There was one surviving band of mustangs in the Tehachapi Mountains, the Barilenos, that the vaqueros always claimed were of pure Spanish blood. Some of them may have been used on the Hill's Kern County ranches. The nearby 300,000 acre El Tejon Ranch also used Spanish mustangs, and later brought in an Arab and two Hill-bred Morgan stallions to cross with them.

Roland Hill and his brother Russell were steeped in the vaquero tradition. The brothers learned their cattle and horsemanship skills from Indio and Hispanic vaqueros at their home place and later at the nearby El Tejon ranch. Don Antonio Leiva, long time cattle boss of the Tejon, was one of their mentors. Leiva's son J. A., also a Tejon vaquero, later owned and used Hill Morgans. The Hills routinely hired vaqueros to work cattle and train horses on their ranches. Roland said that "it took three years of very careful training and work under an expert reinsman to finish a stock horse to its full potential." Vaquero storyteller and author Arnold Rojas, who worked for both El Tejon and the Hill ranches, included the Hill brothers in his article on the last of the old time vaqueros. He called them "first-class reinsmen." Russell, who spoke fluent Spanish and was always mounted on Morgans, was said to be the better reinsman, but it was Roland who was most responsible for introducing the vaqueros to blooded Morgans.

THE MORGAN AS A VAQUERO BRIDLE HORSE

The vaqueros readily accepted the Morgans, partly because they were athletic, tough, and trainable, but also because they were naturals as bridle horses. Vaquero horsemanship developed using baroque Spanish horses. The baroque horse is distinctive in its rounded topline and high-set neck rising from well laid back shoulders. Morgans are also baroque horses, and share these conformation traits. Arnold Rojas, in a chapter on Morgans in his book, *Last of the Vaqueros* (1960), says that on a trip to Spain and Portugal he was struck by the similarities between the Andalusians and Lusitanos he saw there to the Morgans he once rode on the Hill ranches. The natural head set of the baroque horse affects the way it carries the bit, and for his rider means a different way of handling the reins. The finished bridle horse comfortably carries a spade bit and works with an arched neck and its face perpendicular to the ground. Thus the California reinsman finds it practical to feed the reins up through his fist. The Texas or plains cowboy, riding a lower headed horse with a flatter topline, feeds the reins through the hand from the top so that the reins lay across the hand. This single difference defines the two styles of horsemanship. Robert M. Hall, master spade bit maker, notes the differences in his book *How To Make Bits & Spurs* (1985). Nearing the end of his 40 year career, he found he had to adjust the angle of the ports in his bits due to the gradual change from the Spanish/Morgan-blooded bridle horses to Quarter Horses that began in California in the late 1940s. Hall explains it this way, "A further word about spade bits—the older ones, say forty years

LEFT TO RIGHT: Jo Johnson and Can Don Joshua Danny; Jo Johnson and DLacey's Midnight Sun.

or so ago. You will see the spade almost straight up in line with the cheeks. The more modern spades and other mouthpieces are laid back quite a bit. The reason for this is due to the type of horses ridden now. Years ago horses' necks came out of the shoulder at a much higher angle than most in this day. Thus the straight-up spade gave the horse a nice head set and somewhat of an arch to the horse's neck. Nowadays, with horses that have a more level neck line, we lay the mouthpiece back to keep from pulling his chin too far back toward his chest. This lets him carry his head in a more natural position."

While the conformation and head set of the bridle horse, and clothing and equipment of the California vaquero clearly distinguished him from the American cowboy and his horse, there were other important differences. The cowboy used a short, fairly stiff rope and tied it hard and fast to the saddle horn. For that he needed a stout, heavy saddle with an added back cinch to hold it in place. The vaquero used a long, pliable leather reata and dallied it around a low, wide horn, which was designed to hold without snapping the leather reata. The cowboy's lariat was used primarily to stop the cow, while the reata was used to work the cattle. The cowboy sat in the saddle ready to brace for the impact of a cow hitting the end of the rope. The vaquero almost stood in the saddle with long stirrups and his legs nearly straight as he balanced over a single, center fire cinch. Another important difference was the relationship of the vaqueros and the cowboys with their horses. The cowboy was usually a drifter moving from ranch to ranch, while the vaquero was often born on the same rancho where he spent his whole working life. Thus the cowboy often dealt with a different string of horses every year or two, while the vaquero was often able to break, train, and stay with the same horses for years. For the vaquero this meant that he had the time to bring his horse along slowly to a high level of training. Even the most skilled cowboy often had to deal with rough broke horses and, sometimes, other people's mistakes.

THE HEYDAY OF VAQUERO AND THE MORGAN STOCK HORSE

Once the Morgans had been tested by Hill's vaqueros and proved their worth, they spread rapidly to other California ranches. Some of these were El Tejon (Kern Co), Schultz, Kuck & Schultz (Yreka), Kings County Land & Cattle Co, (Lemoore), Bixby Ranches (Santa Barbara), Jones Hereford Ranch (Hollister), R A Sperry Ranch (LA Co), Diamond T Ranch (Oakland) C C Reed ranch (Clemente), E W Roberts (High Pass), W T Carter (Sanger), W L Linn (Turlock), Dean Whitter's Lone Pine Ranch, the Hunnewill ranches (Bridgeport, CA & Nevada), Warren Halliday (Bishop & Etna), L G Montgomery (Mare Island), Vail & Vickers (Santa Rosa Island), Cuyama Ranch (Maricopa), Duval Williams (Madera), and William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon, Piedmont Land & Cattle Co., and Sunical Land & Packing Corp. ranches (San Simeon).

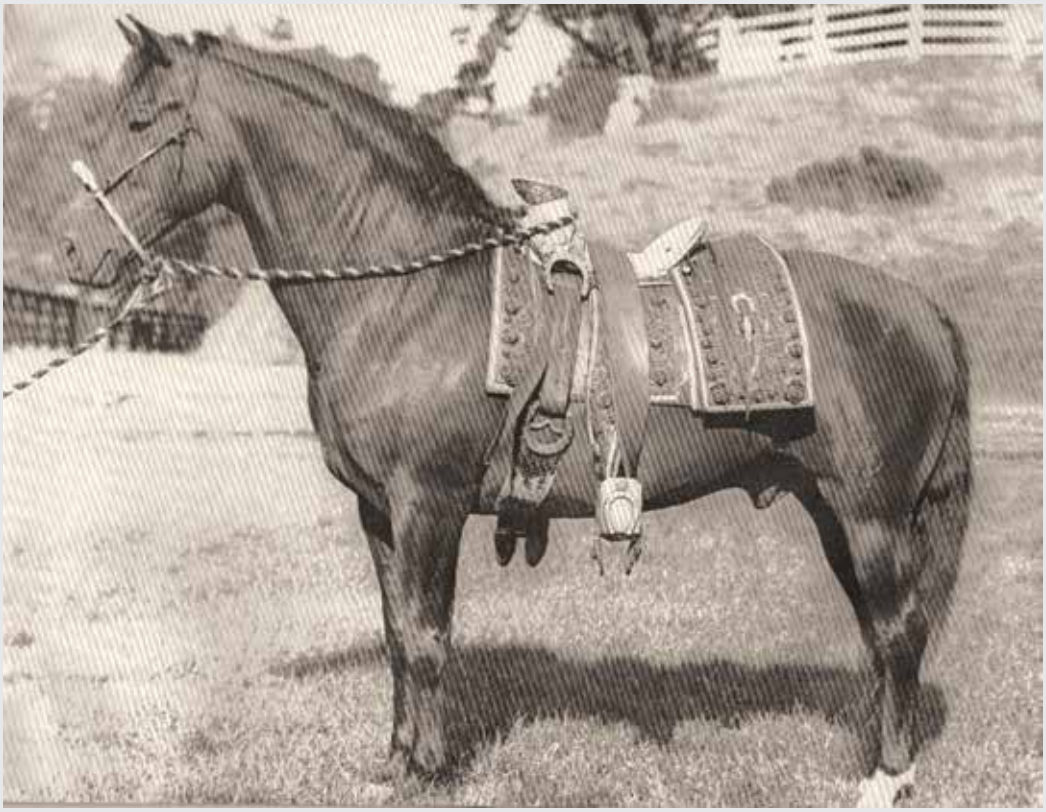
One of the first ranchers to get Morgans from Roland Hill was Duval Williams. He arrived in Kern County around 1900 and started a horse and cattle business. Writing in *The Morgan*

ABOVE: Eitan Beth Halachmy & Santa Fe Renegade.

Horse magazine in 1942, he said, "my cattle ran to the top of 7,000 foot mountains, and here I learned from some of the best pioneer stockmen my ABCs." Over the years, Williams had tried stock horses bred from Thoroughbred, Standardbred, Cleveland Bay, and French Coach stallions, but eventually decided that half-Morgans made the best cow horses. Of the Hill horses, he said, "all their horses on the different ranches are Morgans. They are all broke California style; hackamore and spade bit and riders working for the company are the highest type of horseman that can be hired." In 1927, he bought a two-year-old colt and two mares from Roland Hill. Williams bred a few registered Morgans and a lot of half-breds. Of them he wrote, "I will say my half-Morgans first have a smart, cool head, alert and willing, easy to handle and break, very easy keepers, have a natural saddle back, strong muscled back over the kidneys, flat strong bone on stout legs, and small, strong hoofs. They develop into top cow horses and are long-lived, sound animals that live off the range and need no pampering."

Williams knew and had great respect for the local Spanish horses and for the California vaqueros who rode them. In the September 1939 issue of *The Cattleman* there was an article by Duval Williams titled "Morgan Blood in Our Western Cow-Horse." In it he states that from the earliest times Morgan stallions were brought into California and crossed with Spanish mares, and "a horse was developed that can't be equaled. He survived on what the country put out. He had wind, muscle, bone, feet and greatest of all, endurance." He goes on to say that the big haciendas, with their vast acreage and thousands of cattle and horses, developed the reined cow horse, and "this Spanish art has been handed down from father to son and is still carrying on in the coast country today. The old dons used a silver mounted, full spade, loose jawed Spanish bit, single cinch saddle with a low flat horn, and took the *Dalla Vulta* with a long rawhide reata. Two vaqueros worked teamwork, cutting, etc. riding erect, with the tip of the foot in a long hung stirrup. These superb horsemen took great pride in top-reined horses. Much time was spent on a good colt. First, he was reined with a plaited rawhide *jacama*, then double reined as he took the bit. The mouth was never jerked or spoiled or hardened—he could be reined with the little finger." With the last of the Spanish mustangs rapidly disappearing, Williams had found another breed, the Morgan, which could do the job, and was well suited the vaquero way.

Among the largest ranches to purchase Hill/Sellman Morgans were the Hearst ranches, including San Simeon and the enormous Babicora ranch in Mexico. William Randolph Hearst was the only son of mining millionaire, George Hearst. Like his mining partners James Ben Ali Haggin and Lloyd Tevis, and other wealthy 49ers, George Hearst invested heavily in California land. In 1865, he and his partners bought 30,000 acres of the old Piedra Blanca Rancho on San Simeon Bay. In 1867, they added the smaller Rancho Santa Rosa and Rancho San Simeon. The ruins of two of the original 18th Century Spanish missions lay on this land. These three Mexican land grants formed the nucleus of the Hearst ranches. No doubt



ABOVE: Hacienda Chief, in full vaquero gear, was bred by Russell Hill and used to produce vaquero horses (photo by Rosemary Tallant).

they employed many of the vaqueros already at work on these ranchos. For example, one of the small holdings they acquired was the remains of an 1840 Mexican land grant that was still in the hands of the Estrada family. When Julian Estrada died in 1876, the land was sold to Hearst ranch and his 17-year-old son Francisco, already a skilled vaquero, went to work for the Hearsts and stayed for 60 years. William Randolph Hearst was born into wealth in 1863. In 1880, his father gave him the *San Francisco Examiner*, which he had acquired in a gambling debt, and over time, William Randolph parlayed it into a journalistic empire. He enjoyed his wealth and later built the extravagant Hearst Castle where he entertained the rich and famous and many Hollywood celebrities. Throughout his life he continued to expand his ranch holdings until they reached 250,000 acres, and employed many vaqueros and stock horses.

Hearst could afford the best when it came to stock horses for his ranches, and he bought the best. He was probably aware of Roland Hill's fancy Morgan reined cow horses, and his vaqueros almost certainly were. In 1929, Hearst purchased a herd of 14 young mares and fillies from Roland Hill. Most were out of mares by the Government stud, Red Oak (General Gates x Marguerite), who was the last herd sire for the Sellman ranch in Texas, and were sired by Hill's Government stud, Querido (Bennington x Artemisia). Hearst had served a short stint in the US Congress (1903-1907) and during his time there the US government decided to open a farm in Vermont to breed Morgan cavalry horses. In 1930, Hearst bought a three-year-old stallion, Uhlan (Bennington x Poinsetta), from the Government Farm as his herd sire. Then he purchased eight more Hill mares, all by Querido and out of Sellman mares. They arrived in 1931, well before Roland Hill sold Querido to the Parker Ranch in Hawaii. Hearst registered only 13 foals by Uhlan before he was sent, along with some of the mares, to the huge Babicora ranch in Mexico, where no records were kept. While Uhlan was there, another stallion, Mountcrest Sellman (Joe Bailey x Kitty E), was purchased. He was pure Sellman breeding, but had been foaled in California. Eventually the Hearst ranch became interested in Arabians, and in 1937 a reduction sale of Morgans was held in which Uhlan, Mountcrest Sellman, and eleven mares were sold. Experiments crossing Morgan mares with fine Arab stallions were begun, and the "Morab" was created. A few of the Morab mares and one 3/4 Morgan stallion were permitted registration as Morgans. The Hearst Ranch continued to produce Morgans, and in 1940 they bought another Morgan stallion, Hacienda Chief (Redwood Morgan x Kitty Jay), from Russell Hill. By this time, William Randolph was 77 years old, in failing health and experiencing financial problems. He left the ranch to be closer to his doctors in 1947 and died in 1951. A final Morgan dispersal sale was held in 1948 in which Hacienda Chief and twelve Morgan mares were sold. The last few Morgans were sold in 1949, including the homebred herd sire, Katrilan (Uhlan x Katrina Q). Over the 20 years that William Randolph Hearst bred Morgans, he registered 111 foals and produced an unknown number of unregistered ranch geldings.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Bab Verdugo & Brookwood JP Dan 13720 (Dapper Dan x Linden's Last by Linden Sonfield by Sonfield); Warren Halliday & Redman 8056.

THE TWILIGHT OF THE VAQUERO AND THE REINED COWHORSE

As early as the late 1930s, California ranching was beginning to change. Increasingly, the children of the Hispanic vaqueros were not following their fathers' profession. Perhaps they finally had better opportunities elsewhere. Some did continue in the old ways and a few Anglos arrived to learn vaquero skills and fill in the gaps. The big ranchos were breaking up as development began to eat up land. There was less and less need for the vaquero and his highly trained mount to work cattle on the open range, and there were new ways of handling livestock in confined spaces. Power stops and short bursts of speed, followed by periods of idleness, were the new order of the day. After WWII these trends accelerated, and beginning in the late 1940s a new stock horse breed, the American Quarter Horse, was making its presence felt in California. The Quarter Horse is the first American horse bred specifically to work cattle, and by the time they came along much of that work took place in pens and feed lots. Arguably the Quarter Horse and modern cowboy were better suited to the new cattle handling conditions and methods than the vaquero and his reined bridle horse. Slowly the vaqueros and their baroque horses began to disappear as cowboys on Quarter Horses took their place. At the same time, the leadership of the Morgan Horse Association was increasingly focused on pleasure riding and showing rather than utility horses. By the end of the 1950s, the Morgan was no longer California's premier stock horse and the working vaquero was almost extinct, and the loss of an ancient and highly evolved form of horsemanship was looming on the horizon.

One example of the fate of the vaqueros was "Bab" Verdugo. Born Juan Bautista Verdugo in Los Nietos, California, in 1913, Bab could trace his family back to two Spanish soldiers, brothers Jose Maria Verdugo and Mariano de la Cruz Verdugo, who arrived with the very first Spanish expedition to Alta, California, in 1769. Like many soldiers, Jose Vedugo was eventually rewarded, in 1784, with a land grant of more than 36,000 acres near what is now Los Angeles, less than 25 miles from where Bab was born. The Verdugos were prominent ranchers for decades and managed to hold onto some of their lands until around the turn of the 20th century. Verdugo Mountain Park and Verdugo Mountains Open Space Preserve are named after the family. When Bab was growing up his father was working as a teamster. He learned to drive horses as a boy, but had always shown a special interest in the vaqueros and their horses. By age 17, Bab was already a working vaquero and just a year later he finished his first bridle horse, a Morgan named Amigo (Redman x Easter Lass). For several years he worked on various local ranches honing his skills. As vaquero jobs began to disappear in the late 1940s, Bab turned to training horses to earn a living. He prepared horses for the newly popular horse shows, pleasure riding and even competitive trail riding. Soon he was discovered by Morgan people and became a well-respected and beloved trainer who was particularly successful with Morgans. Although Bab was not able to continue his work as a vaquero, his reinsmanship skills, undoubtedly, contributed to the making of many fine horses.

PRESERVING THE VAQUERO TRADITION AND THE CALIFORNIA BRIDLE HORSE

As California horsemen became aware that the vaqueros and their highly trained horses were rapidly disappearing, they began to think of ways to preserve vaquero skills and traditions so that they would not be forever lost to future horsemen. In 1949, they gathered at a meeting in Gilroy, California, and founded the California Reined Cow Horse Association (CRCHA). Two of its stated purposes were to "improve the breed of the Western reined stock horse" and to "perpetuate the early California traditions of highly trained and well-reined working cow horses." Vaqueros like Roland Hill, who served on CRCHA's official Advisory Committee, were among the founders. But the CRCHA soon gave way to the National Reined Cow Horse Association (NRCHA) which has different, broader goals, and is not tied to vaquero methods. It would be more than 50 years before interest in the vaquero way was again revived.

Although the vaquero and his highly trained bridle horse largely faded into history, there were a few master reinsmen who kept the Vaquero tradition alive. One of these is Ray Ordway. He was one of the very last working vaqueros. Although not Hispanic, Ray and his family have worked cattle the vaquero way since 1870, when the family migrated to California and began ranching. Ray's father Ira, born in 1879, was only 14 when he joined his older brothers working on the historic Rancho Jesus Maria, an 1837 Mexican land grant near Santa Barbara. Ira so admired the ranch's vaqueros that he learned Spanish so he could better communicate with them and perhaps to convince them of his sincere interest in learning their ways. He became a skilled vaquero himself and passed his knowledge on to his four sons. The whole family stayed in the cattle business, working for others and on their own lands. Ray was born in 1924, and except for a stint in the military during WWII, he spent his whole life working cattle and training horses the vaquero way. After the war, he worked in the San Joaquin Valley on the H Moffat & Co. and Jack ranches. Most of the outfits he worked for used Morgans or Morgan/Spanish mustang crosses. Ray said, "My father and the old vaqueros were high on Morgans before the Quarter Horse was introduced to California. They liked the endurance and intelligence of the Morgan, and the horse's back held a centerfire saddle well." In 2010, Ray Ordway was the honoree at the Vaquero Heritage Days at the historic San Juan Bautista Mission. At the time, at age 86, he was still occasionally riding and roping aboard his buckskin Morgan gelding "Henry" (registered name HMSTD Shuda Bin A Cowboy). He was riding Henry in a hackamore, and hoped to bring him along as his last finished bridle horse. Ray finally hung up his spurs in 2012. He still takes great pride in passing the vaquero traditions and skills on to a younger generation of horsemen. Fortunately, there are a few who have the determination, patience, dedication, and skill to take a horse from the hackamore to "straight up" in a spade bit, a process that may take several years.

Today efforts are underway to revive and promote vaquero horsemanship. In 2010, the first Vaquero Heritage Days was held at historic San Juan Bautista Mission. It showcased vaquero history, equipment, arts, crafts, and live demonstrations. Presenters included long time vaqueros, Bruce Sandifer and Richard Caldwell, as well as Morgan breeder Jo Johnson and JaF Sunrise Surfer Dude (Can Don Joshua Danny x Ursula's Higuera Bandita), her palomino Morgan stallion with a pedigree rich in the blood of California Morgan stock horses. Surfer Dude was still in a hackamore at the time. However, Jo Johnson had trained his sire, Can Don Joshua Danny (Shatona Karzan x Danny's Dutchess), from hackamore to straight up in the bridle. He is thought to be the first modern Morgan to reach the highest level of vaquero bridle horses. Along the way, Jo and Danny were mentored by Ray Ordway and completed Mike Bridge's five-year, bridle horse program. Today, Jo Johnson breeds and trains bridle horses at her Jaquima a Freno Morgan Stock Horses in Sanger, California.

Two important modern developments in horsemanship are linked to both the vaquero tradition and Morgan horses. One is Natural Horsemanship, a new way of working with and training horses that has spread throughout the world, and changed our relationship with horses. The man who helped found and did much to spread the word about Natural Horsemanship was Ray Hunt. As a boy growing up as a farmer working with draft horses in Idaho, he knew he wanted to be a cowboy. At age 20, he got his first cowboy job at roundup on the huge TS Ranch out of Battle Mountain in Nevada. It was there that Hunt learned to cowboy. At the time, the TS was owned by Roland Hill and was worked entirely with Morgan bridle horses, and that is where Hunt learned to work cattle and handle cow horses. A few years ago, at a clinic in Arizona, someone asked Ray about the horses he once rode on the TS. He looked around the attentive crowd and then said that those Morgans were well reined, excellent cow horses, but he doubted that "many of you here today would be able to handle them." Later, Ray Hunt began to start horses and eventually became a professional horse trainer. He had a knack with horses and learned a lot by trial and error, but then he met up with Tom Dorrance, who taught him a different, horse centered, way of dealing with horses. Gradually, Natural Horsemanship evolved and clinics spread the new ideas and methods far and wide. One wonders if some of the quiet, patient techniques of Natural Horsemanship had their beginnings with the Morgan cow horses of the TS Ranch.

The other development is the new disciplines of Cowboy Dressage and Western Dressage which began in California in the late 1990s. The father of Cowboy Dressage is Eitan Beth-Halachmy, an Israeli/American who was trained in classical dressage. When he came to the United States, Eitan was impressed with the beauty and elegance of well reined, California Western show and pleasure horses. He began to wonder if it was possible to combine Western horsemanship with classical dressage, and slowly a whole new discipline emerged. Perhaps the fact that he chose a baroque breed, the Morgan, to try out his idea led to a finished horse which looks and moves something like a fancy Vaquero bridle horse. As word

spread about Eitan's work, he began to do demonstrations, and in 2006 he was asked to perform with his Morgan stallion, Sante Fe Renegade (Grandell's Vigilante x Sable N' Mink), at the World Equestrian Games in Germany, and again when the WEG came to the United States, in 2010. Eitan realized that like classical dressage, Cowboy Dressage could be developed into a training regimen to improve any Western horse and rider, and, over time, could rise to the highest levels of horsemanship. Since then, Western Dressage has been recognized as an official sport by USEF, and competitions have spread across the United States and into Europe. Today, there is even a Vaquero division of Cowboy Dressage. Some of the higher level Cowboy Dressage horses bear a haunting resemblance to the fine Vaquero bridle horses of the past.

It bodes well for the future of the Vaquero horsemanship that in July 2016 the fourth annual Early California Skills of the Rancho competition was held in Santa Maria, California, under the leadership of Bruce Stanifer. He founded the California Bridlehorse Association in 2008, and began the first modern day vaquero competitions in 2013. Hopefully, such competitions will publicize and stimulate interest in vaquero skills and traditions, and encourage more horsemen and women to take that long and difficult, but rewarding path to making a finished vaquero bridle horse. The days of the working vaquero may be long gone, but with any luck, the art of the vaquero reinsman and the beauty of the California bridle horse will survive and prosper in the 21st Century, and hopefully Morgan horses will be part of it all. ■

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