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# The California Vaquero and Texas Cowboy: Tracing the Legacy of Spanish Medieval Horsemanship

Sarah Sargent<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

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*“There are always multiple narratives of any historical moment, but that does not mean that as interpretations they cannot tell us something true.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“There’s another, less-known legacy of this early period that explains why we’ve written the Spanish out of our national narrative. As late as 1783, at the end of the Revolutionary War, Spain held claim to roughly half of today’s continental United States (in 1775, Spanish ships even reached Alaska). As American settlers pushed out from the 13 colonies, the new nation craved Spanish land. And to justify seizing it, Americans found a handy weapon in a set of centuries-old beliefs known as the ‘black legend.’”<sup>3</sup>*

## **1. Introduction**

Tracing the legacy of medieval Spanish horsemanship into the New World practices of the California vaquero and the Texas cowboy is an exploration that takes unexpected and complex pathways. It becomes more than a journey of analyzing horsemanship practices. Understanding the development of horsemanship practices requires a consideration of the geographic, political, and historic environment in which they were developed, and how those

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<sup>1</sup> School of Law, University of Buckingham, UK.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Horwitz, “Immigration – and the Curse of the Black Legend,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2006, [https://www.jmu.edu/lacs/\\_files/Horwitz\\_Immigration\\_and\\_the\\_Curse\\_of\\_the\\_Black\\_Legend\\_-\\_New\\_York\\_Times.pdf](https://www.jmu.edu/lacs/_files/Horwitz_Immigration_and_the_Curse_of_the_Black_Legend_-_New_York_Times.pdf).

influenced equestrian practices. The continued influence of these on horsemanship also must be considered, in the complicated journey of these from medieval Spain into the New World. The Texas cowboy has become elevated to a national icon for the United States, taking a place in the narrative threads of the American national myths. The lens of cultural history and cultural heritage to trace the legacy of medieval Spanish horsemanship and practices into Spanish frontiers in the New World, and to look at the factors that shaped them. Ultimately, it provides an account for understanding the role of horsemanship in a wider and richer context for understanding the diffusion and adaptation of Spanish medieval horsemanship into Texas and California. Horsemanship is a potent part of national identity, myths, narratives, and a deeper comprehension of equestrian practices gained through an examination of these as part of cultural history and cultural heritage.

As the United States expanded westward, it began building a narrative that became part of its national myth and identity. This myth and narrative emphasized the superiority of Anglo-American civilization. But it went further than this, also stating that it was a pre-ordained and sacred destiny of this young acquisitive nation to have territory that stretched from coast to coast.

The Texas cowboy that came to symbolize the American national myths and embody its narrative was not an inevitable choice. There are other figures symbolizing events that might have been chosen—perhaps intrepid miners to California in its goldrush heyday, or explorer Zebulon Pike, or other figures from the events of the expanding state. But the Texas cowboy emerged from the dust of history to become that face, and to become associated with fabled stories that provide an inaccurate version of historical events. In unravelling the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship, it becomes necessary to consider historical events from which the Texas cowboy was part of and associated with, in so doing see how the Spanish and Mexican influences on the cowboy are muted, if not negated altogether.

Buenger points out the consequences of leaving out some historical events in the developed Texas narrative – the creation of an atmosphere that justifies past and present inequality and perhaps even prejudice.<sup>4</sup> This muting did not occur only in Texas, it also occurred in the national myths and narratives of the entire United States. Muting the story of Spanish and Mexican origins and rendering them as inferior, made it easier for the acquisitive young nation to justify its new land holdings and grant favourable land holding rights to new settlers, rather than to recognize the existing and long-standing rights from Spanish and Mexican land grants and water rights, in state and national laws, and even in the United States Supreme Court.

Tracing the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship travels on a rich and unexpected path; re-examining the events of the past, understanding them in the context of social, cultural, and political issues of the day. It is not only about the ambitions of the young United States, but of European rivalries, ambitions of empire and religious conversion in the New World. All of these combine and contribute to insight into the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship in the Texas cowboy and California vaquero.

Heritage and the narratives which underlie it are a way of promoting national identity, national unity, political and social dominance of one group or set of interests over another. These narratives can take the forms of national myths, and these myths become accepted as a version of unassailable truth, hiding within them the force of narratives to shape and promote particular views and marginalize others. In tracing the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship, this article presents insight into cultural fusion and diffusion, the power of

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Buenger, “‘The Story of Texas?’ The Texas State History Museum and Forgetting and Remembering the Past,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 105, no. 3 (2002): 490.

historical narrative and heritage discourse, and the way in which an equestrian culture has come to symbolize the United States.

Recently, there has been a rethinking and refocusing on the ways in which history in the New World is being examined. There is a change from a focus that is predominantly on Anglo-American influences, to a much broader lens of focus to include the vast array of actors, acknowledgement of other communities and perspectives, cosmologies, including indigenous peoples, France, and Spain.<sup>5</sup> This approach is taken by this article as it examines the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship. Even today, horsemanship is recognized as an expression and embodiment of more than knowledge of horses – it is part of a wider community of participants, value, knowledge and meaning, in what is recognized as intangible cultural heritage. This is exemplified in the number of horse-related heritage elements that have been inscribed by UNESCO.<sup>6</sup>

A cultural history and an understanding of the narratology behind cultural heritage is taken in this article in its examination of the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship into the Texas cowboy and the California vaquero.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section explains the cultural history and cultural heritage lens that is used to explore the creation of national myths, and which provides the theoretical framework for tracing the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship in the Texas cowboy and the California vaquero. It then explores the myths of the United States and myths of the Spanish Conquest, which are instrumental in understanding the events and narratives which led to the United States' acquisition of Texas and California. The second section discusses horsemanship in Spain at the dawn of its New World Empire, tracing these practices as they evolved and developed to meet the demands of their new environment. It also explores the unlikely vehicle of religious conversion as instrumental in the creation of ranches in the New World, as an integral part of the religious missions established. The third section examines the Manifest Destiny expansion ambitions of the United States in events and narratives, and the distinctions between California vaquero and Texas cowboy. The role of these events in elevating the Texas cowboy to a national icon in the United States' mythology are also explored, alongside a consideration of debates over the origins of Anglo-Texan ranching. Finally, some concluding thoughts are offered.

## **2. Cultural History and Cultural Heritage: The Making of National Myths**

This section explains the lens of cultural history and cultural heritage that is used in tracing the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship in the Texas cowboy and the California vaquero. It considers the importance of a contextualized understanding of historical events and their connection to the narratives that underlie national myths. It then explores the creation of national myths, and how an altered understanding of historical events become embedded in the narrative of the myth and its symbols.

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<sup>5</sup> Juliana Barr and Edward Countryman, "Introduction: Maps and Spaces, Paths to Connect, and Lines to Divide," in *Contested Spaces of Early America*, ed. Juliana Barr and Edward Countryman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> These include "Equitation in the French Tradition" on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, [ich.unesco.org/en/RL/equitation-in-the-french-tradition-00440](https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/equitation-in-the-french-tradition-00440), "Classical Horsemanship and the High School of the Spanish Riding School Vienna" on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/classical-horsemanship-and-the-high-school-of-the-spanish-riding-school-vienna-01106>; and "Chovqan, a traditional Karabakh horse-riding game in the Republic of Azerbaijan" on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/chovqan-a-traditional-karabakh-horse-riding-game-in-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-00905>.

Cultural history is a way of studying and explaining history that sets out to provide a contextualized account of events. It might even be considered a way in which understandings of history that have been skewed by national myths can be corrected, and a more accurate depiction of events explained. Slotkin explains that cultural history involves:

giving a historical account of the activities and processes through which human societies produce the systems of value and meaning by which they live and through which they explain and interpret the world and themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Academics have explained the task of a cultural historian. Mallon comments that "... cultural historians must be careful to trace how their subjects, along with the cultures, discourses, identity and power relations they construct and contest, change across time and space."<sup>8</sup> Rubin further comments that cultural history includes "approaching and identifying ways into the daily lives of people who did not generate a great deal of documentation."<sup>9</sup> Slotkin explains that the task of the cultural historian

to construct a historical account of the development of meaning and to show how activities of symbol-making, interpretation and imaginative projection continuously interlock with the political and material processes of social existence.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the use of a cultural history lens means an exploration of time, events, and attitudes, to understand the past and its representation in the present.

Much of history, including equestrian history, is passed down through written texts and a focus on elite sections of society. Cultural history strives to include an understanding of the common person and their experiences, and so also turns to oral as well as written accounts.

Equestrian knowledge that is passed through word of mouth rather than through written instruments is at risk of being lost or overlooked.<sup>11</sup> Vaquero and cowboy knowledge may now be handed down through word of mouth and practice, but that does not make it any less important than horsemanship knowledge that is represented in learned treatises of the Renaissance. Horsemanship came to form part of the classical education of a gentleman.<sup>12</sup> During the Renaissance period, no small part of this education in horsemanship came from written texts,<sup>13</sup> and these Renaissance era texts continue to be studied today.<sup>14</sup>

But, as Bennett comments, the equestrian knowledge of the vaquero became an oral one, rather than a written one, and this contributes to it being overlooked as a result:

Despite an initial strong interest in literate horsemanship, after the end of the sixteenth century, conditions changed in the New World. Spanish landowners

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gun Fighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Florencia Mallon, "Time on the Wheel: Cycles of Revision and 'New Cultural History,'" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 no. 2 (1999): 342.

<sup>9</sup> Miri Rubin, "Cultural History I: What's in a name?" *Making History*, [https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/cultural\\_history.html](https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/cultural_history.html).

<sup>10</sup> Slotkin, "Gun Fighter Nation," 5.

<sup>11</sup> Deb Bennett, *Conquerors: The Roots of New World Horsemanship* (Solvang, California: Amigo Publications, 1998), 111.

<sup>12</sup> Hilda Nelson, "Antoine de Pluvinel, Classical Horseman and Humanist," *The French Review* 58 no.4 (1985): 519.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson, "Antoine de Pluvinel," 522-523.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, "Antoine de Pluvinel," 523. See also Lysa Marieke Kyre, "An Experimental Study of Pluvinel's Horse Training Around the Single Pillar," in *Historical Practices in Horsemanship and Equestrian Sports*, ed. Anastasija Ropa and Timothy Dawson (Budapest: Trivent, 2022).

had largely ceased active management of their holdings...the first cowboys...proved themselves well able to work with livestock, but because they could neither read nor write, their voice in the history and development of horsemanship has largely been lost and is only now beginning to be recovered. The error of European horsemen and historians – a very great and pervasive error – has been to equate illiteracy with ignorance.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the insight that is provided by a cultural history framework supplies essential dimensions for tracing the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship in the California vaquero and the Texas cowboy. But the lens used in this exploration in this article also considers cultural heritage alongside cultural history.

UNESCO has a series of international instruments that provide measures to recognize and safeguard cultural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage is covered by the 2003 “Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.”<sup>16</sup> It defines intangible cultural heritage as

practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.<sup>17</sup>

Equestrian culture and knowledge fall within the definition of intangible cultural heritage, and this is shown by the number of horse-related elements which have been inscribed as a form of intangible cultural heritage.<sup>18</sup> Tracing equestrian cultural heritage can include a wealth of information, including written and oral information, the clothing of riders, training methods of horses, and the equipment used on horses, as well as the terminology used for horse equipment and rider’s clothing.

The narratives that underlie cultural heritage elements play a powerful role in the creation of national myths. National myths may be inextricably intertwined with specific cultural heritage elements. The cultural heritage element becomes a representation of the myth, providing an easily identifiable symbol that embodies the myth. Because of this, analyzing the making of national myths involves consideration of different meanings that are associated with events and symbols, meaning which are communicated through narratives. But the heritage discourse presents a paradox. While its purpose includes “providing a sense of national community”<sup>19</sup> and thus operating as a unifier, this very purpose instead creates exclusion and inequality. Smith explains: “the heritage discourse also explicitly promotes the experience and values of elite social classes. This works to alienate a range of other social and cultural experiences.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Deb Bennet, *Conquerors: The roots of new world horsemanship* (Solvang, California: Amigo Publications, Inc., 1998), 111. See also Richard Slatta, “Foreword,” in *Cowboy Talk: A Dictionary of Spanish Terms from the American West* by Robert Smead, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), x.

<sup>16</sup> Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (accessed January 28, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Article 2, ICH Convention.

<sup>18</sup> See inscription examples in note 5.

<sup>19</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 30.

### *The Creation of An American National Myth*

The United States created an enduring set of intertwined national myths that justified its desires to expand from coast to coast across the North American continent. These myths include a recounting of history that often strays from a factually accurate account of events, but that is the nature and indeed the task of national myths. The United States has created a Myth of the Frontier which is intertwined with a myth of Manifest Destiny. Together these combine to tell the story of the expansionist United States, and of the character and identity not only of the nation but of the people within.

National myths are highly selective in what they choose to include and what they choose to exclude.<sup>21</sup> Although national myths may be cloaked with a visage of legitimacy and objective truth, and thus taken as historical fact, the opposite is true of their character. Myths are fashioned to present a particular narrative that bolsters an image, a set of values, identifying characteristics, and can be used as a source of communal identity.<sup>22</sup> This is perhaps particularly so in a state that does not have these commonalities, and so must create a fictional one which becomes an integral part of its national myth. As well as providing an inclusive common narrative, national myths also act to obscure or even erase those features of society and community which do not fit into the homogenous picture and story they wish to tell.<sup>23</sup>

The type of nation that is being created and has been created also has much to do with the type of myth that is created. The nation created by settlers and immigrants has a particular type of myth, which Smith explains as that of the “emigrant-colonist:”<sup>24</sup>

They have left or fled their homelands and are bent on building new communities in homelands, often with little regard for the indigenous inhabitants. The elect are the immigrants and their descendants. Theirs is a settler community and mission. They carry with them their values, memories and traditions, regarding themselves as chosen by God for a providential destiny that will abolish the old order and inaugurate a new society.<sup>25</sup>

The United States and its Anglo-American character fits into the emigrant-colonist national mold, of a nation, and its national myth is built within the outline as Smith has described. The national myth presents the certainty of a superior civilization, of a right to the land they desire and to supplant not only previous inhabitants but the cultural and community of those previous inhabitants. The intertwined myths of the Frontier and Manifest Destiny echo the strands of the contents of the emigrant-colonist national myths.

Slotkin describes the “Myth of the Frontier”:

the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy and a phenomenally dynamic and “progressive” civilization.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bahar Aykan, “Whose Tradition? Whose Identity? The politics of constructing Nevruz as intangible heritage in Turkey,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 19 (2014): 5. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.5000>.

<sup>22</sup> Aykan, “Whose Tradition,” 5.

<sup>23</sup> Aykan, “Whose Tradition,” 5.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 137.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gun Fighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 10.

Another dimension of the Frontier myth proclaims the importance of the individual to achieve success through hard work, in a landscape untrammelled by inequality: “the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top.”<sup>27</sup>

The myth of Manifest Destiny became embedded with and intertwined with the Myth of the Frontier, so much so that they have become nearly inseparable. The term “manifest destiny” had been created by a journalist in 1845, to express the justifications of the United States’ aim to control territory from coast to coast on the North American continent.<sup>28</sup> The notion of Manifest Destiny promoted the idea that it was sacredly pre-ordained for the United States to have control coast to coast of much of the North American continent. Miller explains that there are three components that make up the Manifest Destiny myth. The first is a “belief that the United States has some unique moral virtues that other countries do not possess.”<sup>29</sup> The second attribute is the notion of a “mission to redeem the world by spreading republican government and the American way of life around the globe.”<sup>30</sup> The third component is the sense that “the United States has a divinely ordained destiny to accomplish these tasks.”<sup>31</sup>

There are several important messages embedded in the American national myth: the idea of the United States as a superior and favored nation, with an absolute right to the lands it desired, of bringing an enlightened view of civilization, including the power of the individual.

The ambition for expansion and the ideas of Manifest Destiny existed before the term was coined. In its westward sweep, the United States would bring a supposedly superior civilization and knowledge and create room for its brand of democracy to take root. This required muting and minimizing, both literally and metaphorically, the power of the presence of Spanish and Mexicans in these desired lands.

Before the creation of the myths of the United States were myths of conquest and occupation in the New World. These were generated by European powers who were rivals for control over the lands in this new space.

### *A. Myths of Spanish Conquest*

England and Spain were competitors in asserting claims and control over lands in the present-day United States. The myths generated by the Spanish conquest of the New World present justifications for the actions and presence of each, with the English myth presenting a picture of its superiority in the face of Spanish barbarism. This English myth is echoed in the later strands of the myths built up around the Battle of the Alamo, which in turn became instrumental in placing the Texas cowboy at the heart of the national myths of the United States.

One persistent myth of Spanish conquest is a myth that was generated by Spain. It presents the indigenous inhabitants that the Spanish encountered as overawed by the idea of men on horseback. This “myth of native desolation”<sup>32</sup> was that the indigenous peoples

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Malcolm Ebright, *New Mexican Land Grants: The Legal Background in Land, Water and Culture: New Perspectives on Hispanic Land Grants* (1987, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987), end note 70, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Miller, “American Indians, the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny,” *Wyoming Law Review* 11 no. 2 (2011): 332.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, “American Indians,” 332.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, “American Indians,” 332.

<sup>32</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, 114.



viewed Spanish mounted on horseback as gods, and were intimidated into submission.<sup>33</sup> The indigenous Mexicans are depicted as being unable to overcome this feat and resist being conquered.<sup>34</sup> Restall challenges the accuracy of this response of indigenous Mexicans to mounted horsemen, explaining for instance, “[d]elight, not fear, was the reaction of the Chontal Maya king, Paxabolnacha, when invited by Cortes on the occasion of their initial meeting to ride for the first time on horseback into the Chontal capital.”<sup>35</sup>

While inaccurate, the desolation myth helped justify the Spanish conquest of the New World and the social relationships that created great discrimination and maltreatment of indigenous peoples.<sup>36</sup> In this way the consequent treatment of the vaquero, who was mostly drawn from indigenous populations resulting in them being very poor, with inter-generational debts passed through families, was deemed acceptable.

It should be no surprise that Spain’s rival for control of land in the New World, England, created a myth that not only promoted English control of the New World but denigrated the presence and contribution of Spain. This is the Black Legend, a myth that was created and perpetuated by England, casting global rival Spain as cruel and repressive towards the indigenous inhabitants of the New World.<sup>37</sup> Restall explains that “[t]he legend depicted the Spaniards as brutal and bloody colonists who systematically victimized their native subjects.”<sup>38</sup> Further, this myth casts the English as redeemers who help to rescue the oppressed indigenous peoples.<sup>39</sup> Elements of the Black Legend can be found in the mythical recounting of the Battle of the Alamo, discussed later in this article. The narrative of the Battle of the Alamo has contributed to the creation of the mythical character of the American cowboy, while the historical events surrounding it explain the contemporary deliberate distancing by Texan cowboys from Hispanic influenced vaqueros.

It is within the envelope of these myths and narratives that Spanish medieval horsemanship arrived into the New World. But the horsemanship of medieval Spain itself was wrapped up in narratives of national identity and prestige and was soon to be confronted with a rapidly changing world both at home and in the New World.

### *B. Horsemanship in Spain at the dawn of Empire*

A consideration of Spanish medieval horsemanship requires a discussion of exactly what that was. A culturally historical account also places the horsemanship practices within the political and social influences and events of the day, and considers the meaning given to horses and horsemanship. So, what was the status of horses and horsemanship in medieval Spain, at the dawn of the new Empire for Spain in the New World? Change was the watchword for the time, not only for horsemanship but for the whole of Spanish society. The claims to vast lands in the New World occurred just after the *Reconquista*, with the final removal of the Moors from Spain.<sup>40</sup> Spanish national identity at the time was very much in flux.<sup>41</sup> This was due not only to the conquest of the Moors, and assertion of Spanish power, but also to the

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<sup>33</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, 114.

<sup>34</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, 118.

<sup>37</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, 118.

<sup>38</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, 118.

<sup>39</sup> Restall, *Seven Myths*, 119.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Williams, Jr, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 74.

<sup>41</sup> Felix Hinz, “The Process of Hispanicization in Early New Spain Transformation of Collective Identities During and After the Conquest of Mexico,” *Revista de Indias* LXVIII (2008): 13.

opportunities and challenges which arose as a result of the discovery of lands in the New World – and intense European rivalry over these. Religious fervor was a driving force both within Spain and its New World acquisitions. There were also technological changes afoot which resulted in changes in warfare tactics and equipment which changed horsemanship within Spanish elite society.

It was not only a national level of identity in Spain that was changing, the individual identities of those who left Spain for the New World and back underwent transformation:

As far as their own collective identity is concerned they felt more "Spanish" than before the conquest ... The counter-reaction was that the conquerors emphasised their being Spanish in a part of the world where nobody else was ... But later, by returning to Spain ... they should also learn that by crossing the Atlantic in the opposite direction these new identities often melted like snow in the sun.<sup>42</sup>

That is, there was a particular weight placed on being Spanish, in the New World, however it might be expressed, but this was something that lost its significance upon the return to Spain, according to Hinz.<sup>43</sup> This is a curious flux of identity, and the stress on particular characteristics offers insight into the emphasis that might be placed on cultural expressions during periods of cultural exchange.<sup>44</sup> This may be seen in the feudal organization of ranching in the New World<sup>45</sup> - where relationships and ways of operating replicated the Old World despite a rapidly changing environment which saw the waning of feudalism.

Change was occurring as well to the mechanics of warfare, with the advances in the use of gunpowder,<sup>46</sup> and a transition from reliance on the heavy cavalry to other forms of battle strategy.<sup>47</sup> This development meant changes in the way in which social standing was obtained and expressed, including the role and place of horses and horsemanship. Horses and horsemanship remained a marker of social status, but in varying ways.

In Spain, there had been two styles of horsemanship—*a la brida* (*brida*), the form used by the Spanish knight as part of heavy cavalry, and *a la jineta* (*jineta*), the form adapted from the Moors.<sup>48</sup> These were marked by differences in the type of saddle used and the position of the rider. The *brida* form was suitable for a knight, fighting with a lance while mounted, with the high cantle of the saddle providing a bulwark of support for the use of the lance.<sup>49</sup> The knight rode with a long stirrup, the leg stretched out.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the *jineta* form of riding meant that the rider had a shorter stirrup, and a more agile seat.<sup>51</sup>

Despite these changes, the elite status associated with military-styled horsemanship remained. It simply began to take on different forms of horsemanship, as the role of the heavy

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<sup>42</sup> Hinz, "The Process of Hispanicization," 16.

<sup>43</sup> Hinz, "The Process of Hispanicization," 16.

<sup>44</sup> Hinz, "The Process of Hispanicization," 16.

<sup>45</sup> Willard Robinson, "Colonial Ranch Architecture in the Spanish-Mexican Tradition," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 83 no.2 (1979): 126.

<sup>46</sup> Treva Tucker, "Eminence over Efficacy: Special Status and Cavalry Service in Sixteenth-Century France," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 32, no.4 (Winter 2001):1065.

<sup>47</sup> Tucker, "Eminence," 1064.

<sup>48</sup> Elena Lourie, "A Society Organized for War: Medieval Spain," *Past & Present* 35 (December 1966), 69.

<sup>49</sup> Bennett, 99-100.

<sup>50</sup> Bennett, 99-100.

<sup>51</sup> Bennett, 99. See also Charles Chenevix-Trench, *A History of Horsemanship*, (Norwich: Jarrold & Sons, 1970), 76-77.

cavalry diminished.<sup>52</sup> Elite horsemanship became associated with the wider learning revival of the Renaissance, where the ability to skillfully ride a horse through intricate maneuvers was seen as part of a gentleman's education.<sup>53</sup> Public displays of horsemanship in this new style—which eventually has become known as Classical Horsemanship<sup>54</sup>—were also seen as a demonstration of the ability to lead and control people as well as a horse.<sup>55</sup> According to Bennett,

Under the Renaissance influence of the Neapolitan school, by the fifteenth century it [brida] had evolved into the “selle royale” or estradiota saddle utilized by the “classical” high school. This style was a true hybrid, incorporating the padded, tabbed tree and long-legged pose of brida, but ridden in a “jineta” balance.<sup>56</sup>

But the development of equestrianism in the New World took a different direction, with the mounted pastoral herdsman, the California vaquero and the Texas cowboy. Ranching itself – that is the keeping of livestock as the mainstay activity rather than a focus on arable farming with some livestock alongside – is now generally regarded as a distinctively Iberian practice brought into the New World.<sup>57</sup> Doolittle argues that it originated in a marshy area of Spain, Las Marismas.<sup>58</sup> The use of mounted horseman to manage the cattle was an Iberian practice as well. As Doolittle explains, “[t]he practice of herding feral cattle with the use of horses ... appears to have been transferred nearly intact from Spain.”<sup>59</sup>

Dary argues that there were three different types of saddles in use in the early Spanish New World, including not only the *brida* and *jineta* saddles from Spain but a stock saddle that had evolved in the Spanish settlements of the West Indies.<sup>60</sup>

### *C. The Development of Horsemanship in New Spain*

The Spanish did not come to an empty land. There were already people living there, with their own established cultural practices and values. It was in the fusion of Spain and the New World that the vaquero came into being. The vaquero himself was a New World person, not Spanish. Yet, while identities may have been in flux and culture changing, the social practices that initially developed in New Spain with ranching and the vaquero were feudal.<sup>61</sup> They were not forward looking but backward looking – perhaps because of the change in the Spanish

<sup>52</sup> Jessica Goethals, “The Patronage Politics of Equestrian Ballet: Allegory, Allusion and Satire in the Courts of Seventeenth Century Italy and France,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 70 (2017): 1407.

<sup>53</sup> Goethals, “The Patronage Politics,” 1406.

<sup>54</sup> Today, there are 4 recognised schools of Classical Horsemanship: Cadre Noir, Spanish Riding School, (both of which are listed on the UNESCO List of Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage), Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art, and Portuguese School of Equestrian Art. See generally [https://www.equisearch.com/articles/classical\\_schools\\_052708](https://www.equisearch.com/articles/classical_schools_052708).

<sup>55</sup> Peter Edwards and Elspeth Graham, “Introduction,” in *The Horse as Cultural Icon: The Real and Symbolic Horse in the Early Modern World*, ed. Peter Edwards, A. E. Enenkel, Elspeth Graham (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 11.

<sup>56</sup> Bennet, *Conquerors*, 121.

<sup>57</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 69; William Doolittle, “Las Marismas to Pánuco to Texas: The Transfer of Open Range Cattle Ranching from Iberia through Northeastern Mexico,” *Yearbook (Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers)* 13: (1987), 7, 8. Charles Julian Bishko, “The Peninsular Background of Latin American Cattle Ranching,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 32, no.5 (1952): 493-495.

<sup>58</sup> Doolittle, “Las Marismas,” 3.

<sup>59</sup> Doolittle, “Las Marismas,” 8.

<sup>60</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 29.

collective identity, the emphasis placed on being Spanish in the New World led to an exaggeration of the feudal features. Or it may have been a way to maintain something familiar in an otherwise rapidly evolving environment.

The Spanish interest in the New World was more than one acquisitive of riches and land. It had a religious dimension as well. Following a series of Papal Bulls, in the Treaty of Tordesillas 1494, Spain and Portugal entered into an agreement which divided the world between them.<sup>62</sup> The Treaty essentially provided the whole of the Western hemisphere to Spain.<sup>63</sup> Spain's motivations for control of the New World included the conversion of indigenous peoples to the Catholic Christian faith.<sup>64</sup> In a very direct, and also unlikely, way the religious fervor for conversion contributed to the development of New World ranching and New World equestrian culture. For missions became the institution that helped the Spanish promote this conversion ambition. Ranching became an activity which helped the survival of the missions.<sup>65</sup> As Jackson explains:

The mission was the quintessential Spanish frontier institution, designed to subjugate native groups living on the fringes of Spanish America and to implement social, cultural, and religious change among the native populations at less cost to the Crown.<sup>66</sup>

Ranching in the New World had both a religious and a secular dimension. The desire and quest for conversion was something that sprang from the long-fought *Reconquista*, which had ended only shortly before Spain began its expansion into the New World.<sup>67</sup> Even while missions complete with their ranches were being set up, Spain was also encouraging secular ranching because it did not require payments of expenses associated with the religious mission ranches.<sup>68</sup> The organization of the secular ranches replicated Spanish feudal social and work arrangements.<sup>69</sup>

Denhardt notes that vaqueros were usually drawn from indigenous groups on the mission.<sup>70</sup> The vaqueros were the only indigenous people permitted to ride horses.<sup>71</sup> Otherwise, indigenous people were strictly kept from horses<sup>72</sup> - due to the Spanish fear that acquisition of horse knowledge could be a security risk to the Spanish. Interestingly, not all vaqueros used saddles – some rode bareback.<sup>73</sup>

But it was not only the vaquero equestrian culture that was developing. Wilder explains that in addition to the mounted herdsman that were the vaqueros, there were “charros, who represented the middle and upper classes and who practiced riding exercises that dated back to medieval Spain.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Williams, *The American Indian*, 79-81.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, *The American Indian*, 80.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, *The American Indian*, 80

<sup>65</sup> Robinson, “Colonial Ranch Architecture,” 123.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Jackson, “Missions on the Frontier on Spanish America,” *Journal of Religious History* 33 no. 3 (2009): 330.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson, “Missions,” 330.

<sup>68</sup> Robinson, “Colonial Ranch Architecture,” 124-125.

<sup>69</sup> Robinson, “Colonial Ranch Architecture,” 126.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Denhardt, “The Role of the Horse in the Early Social History of California,” *Agricultural History* 14, no.1 (1940): 17.

<sup>71</sup> Denhardt, “The Role of the Horse,” 17.

<sup>72</sup> Denhardt, “The Role of the Horse,” 17.

<sup>73</sup> Denhardt, “The Role of the Horse,” 17.

<sup>74</sup> Janeen Wilder, “Reins, Rigging and Reatas: The Outfit of the Great Basin Buckaroo,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104 no.3 (2003): 368.

Writing about California missions, Jackson and Castillo explain that ranching made use of free-ranging herds across a wide expanse of land: "...with the abundance of land, thousands of head of livestock could be kept on pasture that otherwise could not be exploited due to the limited labor available on missions."<sup>75</sup> Thus, the use of free-ranging herds not only reflected herding practices brought from Spain,<sup>76</sup> but was also a necessity dictated due to the numbers of vaqueros available to herd and work cattle herds. Nevertheless, the general practice of free-ranging herds of cattle over vast expanses of land had its origins in Spain, and was a practice adapted to accommodate the demands of the New World landscapes to which it was imported.

Ranching soon began to reflect changes in styles of saddles, where modifications were being made to Spanish saddles to suit the demands of cattle ranching in New Spain.<sup>77</sup> Adaptations were made to the Spanish styles to change the seat of the vaquero, allowing him to ride with a longer leg position.<sup>78</sup> This provided more security in the saddle.<sup>79</sup> Stirrups also became made from wood, rather than metal, due to a lack of available metal ones.<sup>80</sup> Interestingly, this is a modification that remains in the present day, where Western style stock saddles and vaquero saddles still use a wooden stirrup, in contrast to the metal one of an English or forward saddle. A larger saddle horn was also created, to help the vaquero when working cattle with a rope.<sup>81</sup> Along with the development of the larger saddle horn, changes were made to the wood used to construct saddle trees, the supporting skeleton of the saddle structure, to "harder woods than the light cactus wood first used."<sup>82</sup> This in turn provided a stronger platform for the use of the rope, secured to the saddle horn, with such effect that working cattle with ropes rather than lances became the predominant practice.<sup>83</sup> The use of lances was all but abandoned in favor of working with ropes.<sup>84</sup>

#### *D. Mission Ranching in California and Texas*

Missions were first established in California in 1769.<sup>85</sup> Over time 21 Franciscan missions were established.<sup>86</sup> These "were designed to be the primary institutions through which California's diverse array of indigenous groups would be converted to Catholicism and Euro-American pathways."<sup>87</sup> The mainstay of cattle ranching was a trade in tallow and hides, rather than in the meat of the animal.<sup>88</sup>

The Spanish also brought with them a particular system of horse training, again one which is reflective of the cultural fusion of horsemanship with Moorish practices. This is a system of horse training that remains used today, both by California vaqueros and by some adherents

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<sup>75</sup> Robert Jackson and Edward Castillo, *Indians, Franciscans and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>76</sup> Doolittle, "Las Marismas," 3.

<sup>77</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 31.

<sup>78</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 31.

<sup>79</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 31.

<sup>80</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 31.

<sup>81</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 31.

<sup>82</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 31.

<sup>83</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 33.

<sup>84</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 33.

<sup>85</sup> Lee Panich, "Indigenous Vaqueros in Colonial California," in *Foreign Objects: Rethinking Indigenous Consumption in American Archaeology*, ed. Craig Cipolla, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017): 190.

<sup>86</sup> Panich, "Indigenous Vaqueros," 190.

<sup>87</sup> Panich, "Indigenous Vaqueros," 190.

<sup>88</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 54-55.

of “natural horsemanship.”<sup>89</sup> A foundational component of this is starting the horse in a hackamore rather than a bridle with a bit.<sup>90</sup>

The word “hackamore” contains information about the origin of the instrument itself. Smead explains that the Anglicized word comes from the Spanish term “jaquima,” which in turn is derived from an Arabic word meaning “halter.”<sup>91</sup>

The result is a horse with the moves which are considered characteristic of the California bridle horse, as explained by Connell and Carrol:

The horse eventually goes in a spade bit if bitted... such a horse will slide, roll-back and whirl through movements of the rider’s fingers, the hand being immobile. <sup>92</sup>

This was not simply a stylistic movement – it was one that was developed because of practical necessity – the ability of the California vaquero’s horse to perform its characteristic move of “stopping and turning”<sup>93</sup> was developed to be able to avoid the grizzly bears that were in the ranching areas of California.<sup>94</sup>

Missions and mission ranching were also established in Texas; indeed, these were set up some fifty years earlier than missions and mission ranching in California.<sup>95</sup> Ranching soon became the dominant economic activity<sup>96</sup> with secular as well as mission ranching undertaken.<sup>97</sup> One of the first mission and ranches established was in San Antonio,<sup>98</sup> later to become the site of the battle of the Alamo, which has taken its own fabled if factually inaccurate place in American myth. Faulk notes the thriving ranches in Texas at the time of American settlement, as well as the fact that “[a]lmost a century before Anglo-Americans crossed the Sabine River, ranching was a common-place part of Texas life.”<sup>99</sup>

Differences began to emerge between the Texas cowboy and California vaquero once Anglo-American settlers took up cattle ranching. One of the most immediate differences between the California vaquero and the Texas cowboy is the style of saddle which is used. This is a difference that developed in the 1800s and persists until the present day. The style of saddles used by each began to differ by the 1850s, the distinction being borne of necessity.<sup>100</sup> Dary describes the differences in the appearances of saddles:

These Texas saddles did not include the large rigging rings that were still seen on the Mexican vaquero’s saddle; they had smaller rings but did continue to use the narrow latigos or straps that held the saddle on the horse. The Texans also cut down the size of the Mexican saddlehorn, making it slimmer, but

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<sup>89</sup> Bennett, *Conquerors*, 381-382.

<sup>90</sup> Jeff Sanders, *The California Hackamore Horse* (California Vaquero, s.r.o., 2019), 23-24.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Smead, *Cowboy Talk: A Dictionary of Spanish Terms from the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004): 100-101. See also George Steward, “Two Spanish Word Lists from California in 1857,” *American Speech* 16, no.4 (December 1941), 263, on the Spanish derivation of the word “hackamore.”

<sup>92</sup> Ed Connell and Jack Carroll, “A Hackamore Horse,” in *Vaquero Style Horsemanship: A Compilation of Articles and Letters*, ed. Ed Connell (Wimberly: Lennoche Publishers, 2004), 21.

<sup>93</sup> Ed Connell, “Cowboy Talk,” in *Vaquero Style Horsemanship*, 39.

<sup>94</sup> Connell, “Cowboy Talk,” 38-39.

<sup>95</sup> Fred Kniffen, “The Western Cattle Complex: Notes on Differentiation and Diffusion,” *Western Folklore*, 12, no.3 (July 1953): 184.

<sup>96</sup> Odie Faulk, “Ranching in Spanish Texas,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no.2 (1965): 262.

<sup>97</sup> Faulk, “Ranching in Spanish Texas,” 263.

<sup>98</sup> Kniffen, “The Western Cattle Complex,” 184.

<sup>99</sup> Faulk, “Ranching in Spanish Texas,” 266.

<sup>100</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 115.

maintaining the strength of the larger Mexican saddlehorn by running the front rigging on their saddles around the saddlehorn.<sup>101</sup>

Resultantly, the California vaquero uses a saddle with a single cinch,<sup>102</sup> while the Texas cowboy uses a saddle that has two cinches, with an extra “flank strap” that the vaquero saddle does not have.<sup>103</sup>

Another difference between the California vaquero and the Texas cowboy was the way in which a rope used to secure cattle was used. The California vaquero did not tie their rope onto the saddle horn until catching the cattle, and then secured the rope to the saddle horn “by means of dallies (from *dar la vuelta*) or turns.”<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, the Texas cowboy had the rope tied around the saddle horn from the outset.<sup>105</sup> It was these differences in the way in which the rope was used that contributed to the different number of cinches.<sup>106</sup> The Texas saddle needed the stabilization provided by a second cinch, due to the tying of the rope onto the saddle horn.<sup>107</sup>

There were also differences in the rope that each used: “Texans used a short maguey or hemp rope...; the Californian, a long rawhide reata...”<sup>108</sup>

Dary comments that the gold-rush brought an abrupt end to the ranching systems in California, resulting in contested land claims between Spanish and Mexican land grant holders and the newly arrived Anglo-Americans.<sup>109</sup> A similar conflict occurred after the United States acquisition of Texas, where the land rights held through Spanish and Mexican land grants were eroded, the erosion upheld by another United States Supreme Court decision.

It is in this milieu that the myth of the Texas cowboy began to take shape. The historical contests over California and Texas, both before and after United States acquisition, provide an important contextual understanding of why the cowboy is presented as Anglo-American, individualistic, triumphant, and in turn why indigenous, black, and Spanish elements of the actual Texas cowboys were relegated to near invisibility. In order to be a character that could perform as part of the American national myths, the Texas cowboy had to be presented in this light.

### **3. Into the West: Horsemanship, History and Myths of the American West**

As unlikely as it may have seemed for the Texas cowboy to be given this mythical position, the intense conflicts between Mexico and the United States provided the catalyst.

The Alamo and the cry “Remember the Alamo” are a feature backdrop in imagination for the image of the American cowboy.<sup>110</sup> This event is both historical and fictional, and its depiction in film and folklore elevated the Texas cowboy to the status of a national iconic hero. But as Swanson notes, much of what is believed to be accurate about the Alamo and the events that took place is erroneous.<sup>111</sup> Myth has replaced fact, and the Alamo has become

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<sup>101</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 115.

<sup>102</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 245.

<sup>103</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 245.

<sup>104</sup> Kniffen, “The Western Cattle Complex,” 185.

<sup>105</sup> Kniffen, “The Western Cattle Complex,” 185.

<sup>106</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 245.

<sup>107</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 245.

<sup>108</sup> Kniffen, “The Western Cattle Complex,” 185.

<sup>109</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 90.

<sup>110</sup> See, for instance, Philip Swanson, “Remember the Alamo? Mexicans, Texans and Americans in 1960s Hollywood,” *Iberoamericana* 11, no. 44 (2011): 88.

<sup>111</sup> Swanson, “Remember the Alamo,” 90.

embedded in the American national myth.<sup>112</sup> To understand this event, the mythmaking around it, and its role in the elevation of the Texas cowboy to the symbol of a timeless American hero, it is important to understand the cultural history setting for this event. The tensions and conflict that existed between Mexico and the United States resonate both in the actual and fictional recounting of the Alamo and are a powerful catalyst for separating the identity of the Texas cowboy from the vaquero.

As Wilder explains, by the 1830's there was already deliberate distancing by the Texas cowboy from his Mexican vaquero counterpart:

Beginning in the 1830s, however, the primary reason for the move away from the vaquero tradition was "a virulent and enduring prejudice against Mexicans [that] prevailed among Anglo Texans," an attitude that retarded "additional and more pervasive borrowing of Hispanic traits and personnel." Texans modified their outfit so they would not be mistaken for vaqueros and chose the term "cowboy" over "buckaroo" to distinguish themselves from their Mexican counterparts.<sup>113</sup>

Just why this was so—and why this distinction is maintained - requires an examination of the historical context. Slatta comments that “[c]owboy material culture and ranch terminology reveal the profound debt that American ranch culture owes to Mexico.”<sup>114</sup> But this debt is not apparent in national narratives and myths. Understanding the historical events helps to explain the diffusion of Spanish medieval horsemanship through the lens of cultural history and cultural heritage.

The Alamo itself was a Spanish mission and later garrison in present-day San Antonio, Texas.<sup>115</sup> The Alamo has featured in the depiction of the American West, in novels and films, curiously with a cowboy as a key character in its events. In the many fictionalized recreations of the Alamo in US novels and films, it becomes “a tale about tyranny and freedom.”<sup>116</sup> Through these retellings, the Alamo becomes part of the American myth, and within it, the Texas cowboy as the symbol of a harbinger of the virtues of American democracy and superiority. The re-telling of the Alamo hearkens back to the depictions of The Black Legend, only now rather than Spain, Mexico becomes the villain, where “Mexicans are craven outragers of everything that is good, pure, and decent.”<sup>117</sup> Graham explains that

Virtually all the works about the Alamo express this meaning: at the Alamo the Texans acted on behalf of freedom against tyranny, and therein lies a lesson for all future ages.<sup>118</sup>

In reality, the Alamo conflict was something altogether different from its depiction, and the Anglo-Texans were defeated there. It is the narrative power of myth building that has changed the story of the Alamo altogether. Here the strands of myth around the cowboy also began to emerge – the cowboy himself representing freedom and the benefits of individualism within Anglo-American society.

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<sup>112</sup> See Paul Andrew Hutton, “The Celluloid Alamo,” *Arizona and the West* 28, no.1 (Spring 1986): 5-22.

<sup>113</sup> Wilder, “Reins, Riggings,” 369.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers: New Perspectives on the History of the Americas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997): 171.

<sup>115</sup> Swanson, “Remember the Alamo,” 90-91.

<sup>116</sup> Don Graham, “Remembering the Alamo: The Story of the Texas Revolution in Popular Culture,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89, no.1 (1985):46.

<sup>117</sup> Graham, “Remembering the Alamo,” 46.

<sup>118</sup> Graham, “Remembering the Alamo,” 44.



In order to understand the further development of the Texas cowboy, it is important to understand the context in which the Alamo occurred and the driving desires for American acquisition of land held by Mexico.

### *A. Manifest Destiny*

In 1803, the United States began in earnest to fulfil an ambition that would later become known as “Manifest Destiny.” The United States, in 1803, acquired a large swathe of the continental interior from France, in what was known as the Louisiana Purchase.<sup>119</sup> Texas and California were not part of that land purchase, and at the time remained under the control of Spain. The ownership and control of the Louisiana Purchase lands had in fact changed hands between France and Spain, with France obtaining control just before their sale to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase.<sup>120</sup> Spain and France had been rivals for control over the interior of the continent, with the Spanish having a presence in Florida, as well as the present-day Southwestern United States. France controlled other parts of the interior, including along the Mississippi River.<sup>121</sup> Following the Louisiana Purchase, much of the interior of the continent was controlled by the United States but did not fulfil its coast-to-coast territorial ambition. Moreover, although France was removed as a rival, Spain remained with a significant presence in what today is the southwestern United States.

In 1819, Spain and the United States had entered the Treaty of Adams-Onís, by which the area of Florida was ceded by Spain to the United States.<sup>122</sup> The treaty also set boundaries between Spanish territory and the United States, fixing the boundary of lands which had been disputed since the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.<sup>123</sup> The US had maintained that the Louisiana Purchase included land east and north of the Sabine River which included parts of Texas, while Spain maintained that it did not.<sup>124</sup> The treaty settled those claims, establishing the boundary such that Texas was not included as land of the United States.<sup>125</sup> But the United States was soon to reassert its interest in Mexico and made unsuccessful efforts to purchase Texas in 1827 and 1829.<sup>126</sup>

In 1821, Mexico won a war of independence from Spain.<sup>127</sup> This meant that Texas and California were under Mexican control. Settlement of Texas to Anglo-Americans was opened up by Mexico in the 1820s.<sup>128</sup> The opening up of settlement was very attractive to Americans, because Texas offered the opportunity to acquire land that was not available within the United States.<sup>129</sup> As well, there was economic difficulty in the US, and Texas beckoned as a land of opportunity.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Louisiana Purchase Treaty, April 30, 1803, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/louis1.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/louis1.asp).

<sup>120</sup> Price Daniel, Sr, “Observation: The Sabine River Boundary between Texas and Louisiana,” *Southwestern Law Journal* 29 no.4 (1975): 876.

<sup>121</sup> Daniel, “Observation,” 876-877.

<sup>122</sup> Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, Sons of DeWitt Colony, Texas, [web.archive.org/web/20150428202343/http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/adamonis.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20150428202343/http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/adamonis.htm).

<sup>123</sup> Markus Puder, “The Adams-Onís Treaty’s Bicentennial and Its Enduring Legacy for the American Doctrine of Self-Executing and Non-Self-Executing Treaties,” *Journal of Southern Legal History* 27 (2019): 79-80.

<sup>124</sup> Daniel, “Observation,” 876-877.

<sup>125</sup> Daniel, “Observation,” 876-877.

<sup>126</sup> Alleine Howren, “Causes and Origin of the Decree of April 6, 1830,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 16, no.4 (1913): 383-384.

<sup>127</sup> Howren, “Causes and Origins,” 378.

<sup>128</sup> Howren, “Causes and Origins,” 379.

<sup>129</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 68.

<sup>130</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 68.

The American settlers coming into Texas were not originally interested in ranching.<sup>131</sup> Rather, they were interested in farming,<sup>132</sup> and arrived with little background in cattle raising.<sup>133</sup> But these settlers very quickly realized the necessity of ranching, and a process of cultural fusion began. Anglo-Texan ranching began as a means of providing themselves with food.<sup>134</sup> The Anglo-Texan settlers began to adapt their own saddles to be more like the vaquero's or to acquire the vaquero style saddle.<sup>135</sup> Wilder explains that the role of the horse changed:

In Texas, the Anglo immigrants could no longer consider horses only as a form of transportation, and they adopted the vaquero practice of working cattle from the back of a horse.<sup>136</sup>

In the same time period in California, in 1833, Mexico passed legislation which transferred mission landholding to private ownership.<sup>137</sup> This also meant freeing native peoples from the control of the religious missions.<sup>138</sup> With the establishment of large privately owned ranches, these newly freed indigenous peoples were "recruited ... to work as vaqueros."<sup>139</sup>

With the arrival of the American settlers in Texas, tensions immediately ensued, with disputed claims over control over the Texas lands. The United States, keen to fulfil its ambition of territorial expansion over the continent, which would later become known as "Manifest Destiny," was eager to acquire Texas.<sup>140</sup> There was also pressure from Spain, who attempted to regain Mexico in 1829.<sup>141</sup>

Mexico, concerned about the effects of the American settlement and desire to continue with slaveholding, enacted the Decree of April 6, 1830, which banned further settlement by Americans.<sup>142</sup> Howren explains that

The Decree of April 6, 1830, was an attempt of Mexico to save Texas to the Mexican nation by strengthening the ties of that state with Mexico and severing those which bound it to the United States.<sup>143</sup>

The number of US immigrants into Mexico caused concern that they would demand that Texas become part of the United States and insist upon the legality of slavery.<sup>144</sup> There were also fears that Texas would "increasingly turn towards the north and away from the rest of Mexico."<sup>145</sup>

On the other hand, during this time period of intense conflict in Texas, California was also opened up to settlement from the United States.<sup>146</sup> There was a distinct lack of animosity

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<sup>131</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 69.

<sup>132</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 69.

<sup>133</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 69.

<sup>134</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 69.

<sup>135</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 77.

<sup>136</sup> Wilder, "Reins, Riggings," 369.

<sup>137</sup> Wilder, "Reins, Riggings," 370.

<sup>138</sup> Wilder, "Reins, Riggings," 370.

<sup>139</sup> Wilder, "Reins, Riggings," 370.

<sup>140</sup> Howren, "Causes and Origin," 383.

<sup>141</sup> Howren, "Causes and Origin," 379.

<sup>142</sup> Howren, "Causes and Origin," 421.

<sup>143</sup> Howren, "Causes and Origin," 421.

<sup>144</sup> Howren, "Causes and Origin," 421.

<sup>145</sup> Bruce Winders, The Law of April 6, 1830, (April 6, 2017) The Alamo, <https://officialalamo.medium.com/the-law-of-april-6-1830-6495124992a6>

<sup>146</sup> Wilder, "Reins, Riggings," 371-372.

between the newly arrived Anglo settlers and the Mexicans in California compared to events and views that were to unfold in Texas.<sup>147</sup>

Conflicts over Texas culminated with events in 1836 that led to the declaration of the Republic of Texas as independent from Mexico. Anglo-Texans gained control of a garrison, The Alamo, in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>148</sup> Mexican troops besieged the garrison for 13 days, which ended with the Mexican troops retaking the garrison.<sup>149</sup> The final battle of the Texas rebellion was the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836.<sup>150</sup> This defeat of the Mexican troops resulted in Anglo-Texans declaring an independent Republic of Texas, a claim that was never recognized by Mexico.<sup>151</sup>

Griswold del Castillo comments that a persistent boundary dispute about Texas was a significant contributor to the war which eventually broke out between the United States and Mexico in 1846.<sup>152</sup> He summarizes the events leading up to the war:

...on May 1, 1845, Congress passed a resolution of annexation, and thus the United States inherited the Texans' controversial claim to the Rio Grande boundary. The resulting border conflict figured prominently as a cause of the Mexican War and as an item of dispute in the treaty negotiations.<sup>153</sup>

But Ebright suggests a larger cause for the conflict – the desire of the United States “to fulfil its “manifest destiny” to expand its territory across the entire continent.”<sup>154</sup> That is, while the border may have been a source of contention between the United States and Mexico, the United States wanted much more land than was in the boundary dispute. It wanted land all the way West to the Pacific Ocean. This desire was reached in the contents of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the war between the United States and Mexico. The treaty ceded more land from Mexico to the United States, including California.<sup>155</sup>

Land grants that had been made by Spain and Mexico in these ceded lands, and in Texas, were to be recognized by the United States under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.<sup>156</sup> Perhaps not unexpectedly, the reality of this recognition was quite different than suggested by the Treaty. The United States Supreme Court decision, handed down in 1856, in *McKinney v. Saviago* 18 U.S. (1 How.) 235 (1856) held that the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo did not apply to Texas, thus nullifying treaty provisions for protecting the land grants made by Mexico and Spain.<sup>157</sup>

Landholding in California through Spanish and Mexican land grants was likewise weakened through the passage of the California Land Settlement Act of 1851.<sup>158</sup> Rather than adhering to the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, this Act set up a commission to

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<sup>147</sup> Wilder, “Reins, Riggings,” 371-372.

<sup>148</sup> Swanson, “Remember the Alamo,” 91.

<sup>149</sup> Swanson, “Remember the Alamo,” 91.

<sup>150</sup> Swanson, “Remember the Alamo,” 91.

<sup>151</sup> Griswold del Castillo, “Manifest Destiny,” 34.

<sup>152</sup> Griswold del Castillo, “Manifest Destiny,” 34.

<sup>153</sup> Griswold del Castillo, “Manifest Destiny,” 34.

<sup>154</sup> Malcolm Ebright, *New Mexican Land Grants: The Legal Background in in Land, Water and Culture: New Perspectives on Hispanic Land Grants* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 28.

<sup>155</sup> Jon Michael Haynes, “What is it about Saying We’re Sorry – New Federal Legislation and the Forgotten Promises of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,” *Scholar: St. Mary's Law Review on Minority Issues* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2001), 232.

<sup>156</sup> Haynes, “What is it,” 232.

<sup>157</sup> Griswold del Castillo, “Manifest Destiny,” 41.

<sup>158</sup> Haynes, “What is it,” 257.

examine the validity of lands claimed through a Spanish or Mexican land grant.<sup>159</sup> Moreover, these claims had to be presented within two years or the land would become part of the public land holdings of the United States.<sup>160</sup> A case taken to the United States Supreme Court ultimately upheld the time limits for presenting a claim in California Land Settlement Act – that of *Botiller v. Dominguez* 130 U.S. 238, (1889).<sup>161</sup> Haynes comments that the combined effects of the California Land Settlement Act and Supreme Court decision were to “rob Mexican Americans of their property and their rights...”<sup>162</sup>

These interpretations also served to change the focus of landholding to privilege the individual in a way that promoted the narrative in the American expansionist myths. As Klein explains:

Through the implementation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States’ conception of individual, freely-alienable property rights was imposed upon a land-dependent culture in which common land ownership was vitally important to community’s continued survival.<sup>163</sup>

That is, the triumph of individual land holding can be seen as a representation of the value placed on the individual in the American myth, and this cultural clash was a metaphorical as well as a literal one.

The United States was then engaged in a civil war that lasted from 1861-1865. It was after the Civil War that the cattle drives from Texas northward began. Both the California vaquero and the Texas cowboy engaged in cattle drives.<sup>164</sup> However, it was the cattle drives from Texas north to the railheads in Kansas, and destinations even further north in Montana and Wyoming,<sup>165</sup> that were to become fixed in myth and legend.<sup>166</sup>

The cattle drives from Texas began as a way to bring feral loose ranging cattle to a lucrative cattle market to the railheads in Kansas at the end of the American Civil War.<sup>167</sup> The cattle drives were eventually phased out in the 1880s, the expansion of railroads doing away with the need for long drives to reach them.<sup>168</sup> But as Clayton explains, from this twenty-year span of time, “a legend was born, one that persists to this day, of the man on horseback herding cattle northward.”<sup>169</sup>

Given the growing emphasis on the Texas cowboy as the face of a nation, and the continued emphasis on the national myths of Frontier and Manifest Destiny, it is perhaps not surprising that the Texas cattle drives became incorporated into the fabric of these myths, and that the California cattle drives have been pushed into obscurity. One was a surprisingly convenient vehicle for the narrative of American national myths and Anglo superiority and triumphalism. The other – whose very existence might well challenge the myths now surrounding the Texas cattle drive – was pushed to obscurity. It had to be, for the national myth embracing Texas to develop and succeed. It also meant casting the cowboy as white,

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<sup>159</sup> Haynes, “What is it,” 257-258.

<sup>160</sup> Haynes, “What is it,” 258.

<sup>161</sup> Haynes, “What is it,” 257-261.

<sup>162</sup> Haynes, “What is it,” 261.

<sup>163</sup> Christine A. Klein, “Treaties of Conquest: Property Rights, Indian Treaties, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,” *New Mexico Law Review* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1996), 210.

<sup>164</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 91.

<sup>165</sup> Jim Hoy, “The Buckaroo,” in *Cowboys, Vaqueros, Buckaroos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001): 177-178.

<sup>166</sup> Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries*, 91.

<sup>167</sup> Lawrence Clayton, “The Cowboy,” in *Cowboys, Vaqueros, Buckaroos*, 74.

<sup>168</sup> Clayton, “The Cowboy,” 74.

<sup>169</sup> Clayton, “The Cowboy,” 74.

Anglo, and male. As Slatta comments, “The traditional Western narrative was ‘John Wayne’ history. Hardy brave white men singlehandedly brought civilization to the western deserts.”<sup>170</sup>

### *B. The Spanish Origins of Anglo-Texan Ranching*

From this springs questions about the antecedents of Texas ranching. Is this iconic activity Anglo-American? Or does it have Hispanic antecedents and influences? This has been a surprisingly spirited academic debate, which has ultimately been settled on the influence of Spain and Mexico.<sup>171</sup>

Jordan has argued that there is a significant influence from Anglo-American practices that were brought by these settlers into Texas.<sup>172</sup> Slatta dismisses this argument by Jordan, saying

Reacting to what he viewed as overemphasis on the Hispanic influences on western cattle ranching, Jordan traced putative influences from the Old South westward into the Texas Gulf coast. Ignoring a wealth of linguistic and material culture, Jordan built a very feeble case that convinced few readers.<sup>173</sup>

Jordan ultimately concludes that there was a fusion of ranching practices from both Mexican and Anglo-American influences but blended in such a way that the Texans were unaware of adopting practices from a Spanish and Mexican origin.<sup>174</sup>

Kniffen suggests that evolving differences in practices was inevitable, due to geographic distance and lack of contact of Texas with California.<sup>175</sup> But he also emphasizes that there was a deliberate distancing by Anglo Texans from Mexican and Spanish practices, and that this, as well, contributed to developing differences in ranching practices.<sup>176</sup>

Ultimately, as Doolittle explains the ranching practices in Texas can be traced to Iberian roots, and even a very specific location within Spain. The view as put forward by Doolittle has become the accepted one as to the origins of Texas cattle ranching.

The cowboy began to emerge in entertainment and media, as a character that embodied the American national myths. Johnson explains that:

In the image of the cowboy, silhouetted against the endless Western sky, a nation of immigrants embraced a symbol that was distinctly American, apart from the culture of older societies across the sea, a young working-class hero as strong and independent as America wished to see itself.<sup>177</sup>

The American cowboy has seemingly unchanging and timeless appeal. Yet, an examination of this symbol shows that it can be forged into new forms to be given relevance to leaders and events of a variety of times. It is a flexible and malleable image – even while appearing to be stalwart and unchanging. Christensen explains this occurs because the American cowboy has become an essential character in the national myths of identity of the United States yet has the ability to be reimagined due to its widespread appeal in expressing

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<sup>170</sup> Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys*, 182.

<sup>171</sup> Doolittle, “Las Marismas,” 3, 10.

<sup>172</sup> Terry Jordan, “The Origin of Anglo-American Cattle Ranching in Texas: A Documentation of Diffusion from the Lower South,” *Economic Geography* 45, no. 1 (January 1969), 64.

<sup>173</sup> Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys*, 188.

<sup>174</sup> Jordan, “The Origin of Anglo-American Cattle Ranching,” 83.

<sup>175</sup> Kniffen, “The Western Cattle Complex,” 183.

<sup>176</sup> Kniffen, “The Western Cattle Complex,” 183.

<sup>177</sup> Dirk Johnson, *Biting the Dust: The Wild Ride and Dark Romance of the Rodeo Cowboy and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 26.

essential American values of “pluck, self-reliance, and his zeal to spread American civilization into the unknown.”<sup>178</sup>

Christen argues for a mutually beneficial relationship between the frontier myth and the cowboy as the expression of this. The Myth of the Frontier continues to have resonance because it is attached to the flexible icon of the cowboy, who has come to stand for different things at different epochs in time. The cowboy has proven to be a remarkably malleable image. But despite this, it somehow is also able to project itself as timeless and unchanging, such is the power of the myths that underlie it.<sup>179</sup>

In the modern day, it is not that all traces of cowboys or vaqueros are that of history. They remain an active presence from continuing work as mounted herdsman working cattle,<sup>180</sup> to a presence in leisure and sport, and in entertainment media. The novel<sup>181</sup> and film,<sup>182</sup> “The Horse Whisperer,” put a twenty-first century version of the cowboy squarely into the American public’s consciousness. Rodeo is a popular spectator sport,<sup>183</sup> and competitions featuring the horses trained and performing in the style of the California vaquero are also held.<sup>184</sup>

But the evolution of the cowboy and vaquero is not finished. In the cowboy sport of rodeo, the roping style of the vaquero is used in team roping, which gained popularity in the 1960s.<sup>185</sup> Team roping is a timed event where two horsemen chase a steer.<sup>186</sup> One ropes the head, first. This person is known as “the header.”<sup>187</sup> The second horseman, the “heeler,” then tries to secure both back legs of the animal.<sup>188</sup> Lawrence explains that

...ropes are initially loose from the saddle horns, and after making a catch each roper must take a wrap around the saddle horn, a procedure known as “dallying.”<sup>189</sup>

The use of dally roping by cowboys points to the fluidity and fusion of equestrian practices of cowboys and vaqueros, as well as the continued development in the trail of the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship.

#### 4. Conclusion

The journey of tracing the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship through the California vaquero and the Texas cowboy is one that involves a complicated path through historical events, many of which have been obscured from the American public consciousness because

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<sup>178</sup> Paul Christensen, “The ‘Wild West’: The Life and Death of a Myth,” *Southwest Review* (2008): 316-317.

<sup>179</sup> Christensen, “The ‘Wild West,’” 316-317.

<sup>180</sup> See for instance Margaret Evans, “The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cowboy,” [www.horsejournals.com/popular/history-heritage/21st-century-cowboy](http://www.horsejournals.com/popular/history-heritage/21st-century-cowboy).

<sup>181</sup> Nicholas Evans, *The Horse Whisperer* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995).

<sup>182</sup> *The Horse Whisperer*, Released May 1998, produced by Touchstone Pictures. [www.imdb.com/title/tt0119314/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119314/) (accessed January 28, 2022).

<sup>183</sup> See for instance, “The Economy of Rodeo”, *Western Ranches*, August 8, 2019, **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

<sup>184</sup> “Horse Show, California Rodeo Salinas,” <https://www.carodeo.com/events/2021/horse-show>.

<sup>185</sup> Hoy, “The Buckaroo,” 177-178.

<sup>186</sup> “Rodeo 101: Team Roping,” Team Roping, <https://prorodeo.com/prorodeo/rodeo/rodeo101/team-roping>.

<sup>187</sup> “Rodeo 101.”

<sup>188</sup> “Rodeo 101.”

<sup>189</sup> Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *Rodeo, An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 36. See also Hoy, “The Buckaroo,” 177-178.

they were not included in the myths of who the United States was and is. Tracing this legacy requires an understanding of both the historical events that occurred and the mythology in which they were ensconced, and perhaps changed in their telling.

The influence and legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship can be seen in the present-day cowboy and Californio traditions—with changes and differences between each arising not only because of practical adaptations demanded by the ranching environment, but also due to the intense armed conflicts between the United States and Mexico. This chapter of American history is not well known—despite the glorification of The Alamo in a way which is highly factually inaccurate through film and novels. The actual fact of the defeat of the Anglo-Texans became erased to stand for something else, and it was from this narrative that the character of the cowboy, now the face of the American nation, was created. There is far more research to be done – this article only perhaps scratches the surface of tracing the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship.

The origins of ranching can be traced to a small swampy and marshy area of medieval Spain. Mounted herdsmen tending large herds of free-roaming cattle across wide-open land was once an isolated and uncommon practice. Most livestock raising occurred alongside farming of arable crops. Yet, through an unpredictable unfolding of events and influences, this practice spread into the New World, and became entrenched with the Spanish motivation to convert indigenous peoples to Christian Catholicism. Missions were set up to accomplish the conversion work. Alongside the religious institutions, ranching began as a practical necessity as part of the economy of the missions. Again, as part of practical necessity native people became vaqueros, learning the skills of horse riding, horse training and cattle herding. As missions spread over the New World, so did ranching and the skills and knowledge it required.

Medieval Spanish horsemanship was not one thing, but many styles of riding. These were affected by changes in society, technology and the geography in which they were used. The *brida* style of riding ceased to have a utilitarian value. A new style of riding developed which became an essential part of the new learning of a Renaissance gentleman. Spanish equestrian culture with Moorish roots, traceable through the Arabic roots of such words as hackamore became part of New World ranching equestrian culture.

The equestrian culture of the New World mounted herdsman also became affected by geopolitical events, as rival powers fought for control over the New World territory. In the battleground of Texas, Anglo-American mounted herdsmen sought to distance themselves from the Spanish and Mexican influenced vaqueros – not out of practical necessity but as a statement of the deep political schisms of the time.

As the United States pursued its political ambitions for control of land from coast to coast, myths and symbols grew to justify and express this desire and the national identity of the new nation. The Texas cowboy grew to symbolize the ambitions and character of the United States, becoming a highly recognizable character in the national myths of the United States.

Mounted herdsmen remain today as working roles in cattle ranches across the United States, whether in cowboy or vaquero style. Cowboys are popular in media, while rodeo based on ranching practices that are an amalgamation of vaquero and cowboy practices has become a popular sport. In California, a horse trained in the vaquero tradition is not only a utilitarian horse, but one ridden in competitions for leisure enjoyment. And in natural horsemanship, echoes of the training practices of the vaquero with its Moorish roots can be found.

Equestrian cultural heritage is bound up with, influences and is influenced by many dimensions, including national identity and geopolitical aspirations, and the expressions of these in myth. Tracing the legacy of Spanish medieval horsemanship is not only a matter of looking at horsemanship practices and knowledge – it also requires understanding the context

in which these occurred, and why. In today's cowboy and California vaquero are the legacy of centuries of horsemanship practices, political and religious ambitions, and armed conflict between nations. They hold a very rich legacy indeed.

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