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Brides and Horses

In the old days everyone seemed to live outdoors. Even in Monterey, where we now think we are punished if we do not have central heat, the Californians lived out of doors, cooked out of doors, had fiestas out of doors and grew beautiful gardens out of doors, as well as potted gardens for the houses. There was much gaiety and social life, even though people were widely scattered. The natives traveled as much as possible on horseback. In those days only the old people or the invalids and very small children traveled in the slow cart or "carreta."

Young men would ride from one ranch to another for parties, and whoever found a guest's horse tired would let him go and catch a fresh mount.

In 1806 there were so many horses in the valleys about the San Jose that seven or eight thousand were killed. Nearly as many were driven in the sea at Santa Barbara in 1807, and the same thing was done here in Monterey in 1810. Horses were given to the runaway sailors, and to trappers and hunters who came over the mountains, for common horses were very plentiful, but fast and beautiful horses were never more prized in any country than in California, and each young man had his favorite.

A kind of mustang, that is seldom if ever seen on the Pacific Coast, wrote Guadalupe Vallejo in 1890, was a peculiar light cream colored horse, with silver-white mane and tail. Such an animal often sold for more than any horse of another color. Other much admired colors were dapple-grey and chestnut. Vallejo also recalled stories told by his father and grandfather of the mission fathers sometimes riding a horse but more often traveling in a somewhat modern carriage (1890) called a "volante." It was always drawn by mules, of which there were hundreds in the mission pastures, and white was the color often preferred.

Nothing was more attractive in California in the Spanish and early Mexican days than the wedding cavalcade on its way from the bride's house to the mission church. The late Joe Mora, noted artist of the peninsula, executed a charming group when he modeled and painted the wedding party for the Copper Cup Room at the old Del Monte Hotel, now the Navy Graduate School.

The horses were more richly caparisoned than for any other ceremony, and the bride's nearest relative or family representative carried her before him, she sitting on the saddle with her white satin shoe in a loop of golden or silver braid, while he sat on a bear skin covered "anguera" behind. The groom and his friends mingled with the bride's party, all on the best horses that could be obtained, and they rode gaily from the ranch house to the mission, sometimes fifteen or twenty miles away. In April or May when the land was covered with wild flowers, the light-hearted troop rode along the edge of the uplands, between hill and valley, crossing the streams, and some of the younger horsemen, anxious to show their skill, would perform all the feats for which the Spanish-Californians were famous, so Bancroft and other historians have related.

After the wedding, when they returned to lead in the feasting, the bride was carried on the horse of the groomsman. One of the customs which was always observed at the wedding was to wind a silken tasseled string or silken sash, fringed with gold, about the necks of the bride and groom, winding them together as they knelt before the altar for the blessing of the priest. A charming custom among the middle or lower class was the making of the satin shoes by the groom for the bride. A few weeks before the wedding he asked his betrothed for the measurement of her foot and made the shoes with his own hands; the groomsman brought them to her on the wedding day.